VIETNAM GUN TRUCKS

GORDON L. ROTTMAN ILLUSTRATED BY PETER BULL

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NEW VANGUARD • 184

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 4

MOTOR TRANSPORT UNITS 6
- Gun truck crews

THE ARMY CONVOY SYSTEM 11

THE NEED FOR GUN TRUCKS 18
- The enemy threat to convoys

GUN TRUCK DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT 27
- Gun truck chassis
- 2½-ton M35-series cargo trucks
- 5-ton M54-series cargo trucks
- Armor
- Gun truck armament
- Communications
- On-vehicle equipment
- Gun truck names

GUN TRUCK TACTICS 42

ASSESSMENT 44
- Vietnam gun trucks preserved

BIBLIOGRAPHY 47

INDEX 48

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INTRODUCTION

In May 1965, US Army combat troops began arriving in South Vietnam with the mission of conducting offensive operations against Viet Cong (VC) and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces operating throughout the country. By the end of the year, two full divisions and two brigades were in-country, and by the end of 1966 three more divisions and two separate brigades were deployed, followed by another two divisions and two brigades in 1967.[1] With these combat formations came literally hundreds of service and support units of all sizes. Supplies and material were largely delivered to Vietnam by sealift, and this had to be transported to the user units in the interior.

Field units had to be supplied with tons of ammunition, fuel, rations, and all manner of other supplies and equipment. Divisional and brigade bases and scores of smaller bases and facilities were scattered all over South Vietnam and were spreading deeper inland as the months went by. Many of the bases could only be supplied by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, some only by parachute. In the Mekong Delta in the far south, some bases were supplied by watercraft. Airlift, though, was restricted owing to costs, the demands for aircraft, and the limited tonnage that could be lifted.

Armed and armored "gun trucks" were not new to the Army in Vietnam; they had seen some earlier use. One example is this whitewashed ¼-ton jeep of the 82nd Airborne Division's Provisional Reconnaissance Platoon. It has been lightly armored and fitted with a .50-cal M2 machine gun – the same as used in Vietnam – and is not dissimilar to the armed and armored ¼-ton M151A1 utility trucks used for convoy control in Vietnam 20 years later. (82nd Airborne Division Association)

The most cost-effective means of delivering supplies, therefore, was by ground transportation. This feat required cargo trucks and tractor-trailers to travel over poor roads, often in hilly or mountainous terrain, and through all weather conditions, with ceaseless rain, mud, road and bridge washouts, and engine-killing heat and dust. Added to these conditions were the enemy's ceaseless attempts to attack the convoys with mines, remote-controlled demolitions (today known as "improvised explosive devices"), mortars, recoilless guns, machine guns, and small arms.

[1] See Osprey Battle Orders 33: *The US Army in the Vietnam War 1965–73*

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Supplies had to be transported from the coastal ports of Saigon, Cam Ranh Bay, Qui Nhon, and Bong Son to An Khe, Pleiku, Dalat, Buon Ma Thuot, and many other places. Later, more inland bases were established and additional seaports opened. The logistical efforts expanded and it became a major mission to run convoys throughout the country.

The US Army's Transportation Corps was responsible for ground motor transport as well as water transport (landing craft and amphibious trucks) and certain air transport units. It was also responsible for terminal services – coordinating transportation and transferring cargo from one means of transport to another.

The 8th, 48th, and 500th Transportation Groups were responsible for "line haul"[2] truck transportation to inland bases. The demand was such that units often ran more than one convoy a day almost every day of the year. Convoys as large as 200 trucks were not uncommon. These convoys were tempting targets for the VC; close-range ambushes were frequent, as were long-range fires ranging from snipers to mortars. The NVA were infrequently involved in such ambushes, being reserved for major offensive operations. Ambushes were sometimes large-scale, elaborate, and deadly. Others were simply harassing attacks, but still lethal. The unarmored and mostly unarmed cargo trucks, including 18-wheel tractor-trailers, were extremely vulnerable, and certain road sectors offering favorable terrain to the enemy were notorious as frequent ambush sites.

TOP
Two APC gun trucks, *Big Bad John* and *King Cobra*, which coincidently displays a coral snake rather than a cobra, of the 597th Trans Company. *Big Bad John* discarded the shields for the two side M60s, while *King Cobra* retained them for its side .50-cals. The rear troop ramp was not used for entry and exit, but rather the smaller hatch set in the ramp.

BELOW
An early 2½-ton M35 gun truck, the *Gypsy Queen* of the 572nd Trans Company, demonstrates the appearance of the first models with Stateside-developed bolt-on armor panels with the unnecessary vision ports. It mounted two M60 machine guns (removed here) on pedestal mounts behind the cab. This arrangement could prevent both guns from firing to one side. In the background are the types of barracks drivers and gun-truckers lived in.

Free World infantry units were committed to offensive operations and could not fully secure the numerous and lengthy routes. Military police (MP) units were few in number and their resources too limited to escort the big convoys. Unarmored machine-gun armed jeeps were also of little value as they were too vulnerable.

By 1967, "hardened convoys" were employed. These were convoys of 100 or fewer trucks escorted by a new vehicle, the "gun truck." These early gun trucks were protected by sandbags and armed with two 7.62mm machine guns. When an ambush was initiated, the gun trucks would rush into the "kill zone" and place suppressive fire on enemy ambush positions. Counter-ambush tactics were developed and improved over time.

These early gun trucks were less than effective. The sandbag protection left much to be desired, and when wet from monsoon rains it added too much weight. More firepower was also necessary. Armor plate was installed and numerous machine guns were therefore mounted: weapons included .50-cal and 7.62mm machine guns, 7.62mm six-barrel Miniguns, and M79 grenade launchers. The original gun trucks were 2½-ton cargo trucks, and proved

[2] "Line haul" referred to long-distance transport as opposed to "local hauls" in and about military posts or local areas.

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A line-up of five 27th Trans Battalion gun trucks at the staging base in preparation for a convoy. The two leftmost trucks are APC gun trucks. While every task truck assigned to a convoy had to be double checked for serviceability before setting out, the convoy commander knew that the gun trucks were ready and required no additional inspection.

underpowered when mounting so much armor and weaponry. They began to be replaced by 5-ton cargo trucks. The result was a number of formidable gun trucks, complete with gaudily painted boisterous and vengeful names. M113A1 armored personnel carrier (APC) hulls were even mounted on 5-ton trucks for all-round armor protection. These vehicles were purely defensive weapon systems suited for convoy escort and base perimeter security. Up to 400 trucks were modified to become gun trucks during the course of the war. While most were used by long-haul transportation units, other US units also built gun trucks – some combat engineer battalions converted one or more 5-ton M51 dump trucks to gun trucks to escort their own convoys to worksites. Besides a dump truck, the M51 was fitted with removable troop seats in the dump bed, allowing it to be used to transport engineer squads.

There were instances in the past when cargo trucks and jeeps were provided with add-on armor and sometimes armament for special purposes, but this was rare and not near the scale and effort undertaken in Vietnam.

MOTOR TRANSPORT UNITS

Three groups operated the line haul combat convoy system in Vietnam: the 8th, 48th, and 500th Trans Groups (Motor Transport), which could control up to seven motor transport battalions, but in Vietnam, two or three. Their administrative headquarters were responsible for given areas: 8th – Northern II Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ) operating out of Qui Nhon, then Da Nang from 1970; 48th – III and IV CTZs operating from Qui Nhon, Long Binh, and Binh Thuy at different times; and 500th – Southern II CTZ from Cam Ranh Bay. The 57th Transportation Battalion mainly operated in I CTZ.

Eight motor transportation battalions (motor transport) served in Vietnam: the 6th, 7th, 27th, 36th, 39th, 54th, 57th, and 124th. Not all made heavy use of gun trucks, just those involved with line haul convoys, while the 6th and 7th Trans Battalions assigned to the 48th Trans Group did not employ gun trucks. The heaviest users of gun trucks were the 27th, 54th, and 124th Battalions of the 8th Trans Group.

The principal prime mover for 12-ton M127 cargo, 5,000gal M131 fuel, and 7½-ton M349 refrigerator semi-trailers (shown here) was the 5-ton M52 truck-tractor. The yellow disc with "23" on the truck and trailer is the bridge capacity weight classification. Most gun trucks had a "12" weight classification. INEZ is the truck's nickname.

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The battalions consisted of a 43-man battalion headquarters and headquarters detachment under table of organization and equipment (TO&E) 55-16G, and three–five attached light and/or medium transportation companies identified by one- to three-digit numbers; these companies could be transferred between battalions. The light truck transportation company, TO&E 55-17G (1966), had a strength of 175 men when equipped with 2½-ton trucks and 179 with 5-ton trucks, which required four more mechanics. A unit would be designated, for example, as 512th Transportation Company (Light Truck) (5-Ton). The Medium Truck Transportation Company, TO&E 55-18G (1966), was equipped with 5-ton truck-tractors with 12-ton cargo semi-trailers, 5,000gal fuel semi-trailers, or 7½-ton refrigerator semi-trailers; they were further designated (Cargo), (Petroleum), or (Refrigerator) respectively. The medium cargo and petroleum, oil, and lubricant (POL) companies were assigned 183 men and the 'reefer' (refrigerated) company 201.

Brutus was assigned to the 359th Trans Company. The name was in orange on a black gun box: "359th TRANS CO." was painted on the gun box's rear panel. The vehicle mounted two single .50-cals forward and a twin .50-cal in the rear. Note the open OVE storage compartment just aft of the cab. The 78gal fuel tank is on the other side of this M54.

A total of 13 2½-ton and ten 5-ton light truck companies (four of which were converted to 12-ton and one to 5-ton, and are double counted), and two mixed 2½-ton and 5-ton companies, plus 22 12-ton medium cargo companies, served in Vietnam at one time or another. There were also seven petroleum truck companies and one reefer truck company.

Truck transportation companies, regardless of type, were similarly organized. They possessed a company headquarters with the commanding officer (CO; there was no executive officer – XO), first sergeant, truckmaster, assistant truckmaster, mess steward, supply sergeant, armorer, company clerk, supply clerk, parts supply specialist, dispatcher, seven cooks, switchboard operator, and driver. Each company possessed two 2½-ton trucks with cargo and water trailers and a ¼-ton truck and trailer.

The maintenance section, responsible for second echelon (organizational) maintenance of light truck companies was headed by a warrant officer automotive maintenance technician, motor maintenance sergeant, 11 (for 2½-ton) or 15 (5-ton) mechanics, a wrecker operator, and shop clerk. In terms of support vehicles, the maint section had a 5-ton wrecker, four 2½-ton trucks with three cargo trailers (one truck and trailer carried 600gal fuel tanks), and a ¼-ton with trailer. The maint section of medium companies additionally had an assistant maintenance sergeant, a truck driver, and a total of 16 mechanics, plus a 5-ton truck-tractor with 5,000gal fuel semi-trailer, a 5-ton wrecker, a 2½-ton truck, a ¾-ton truck, and a ¼-ton truck (without trailers). A POL company's maint section had the same, but with a second 2½-ton truck and one each ¼-ton, ¾-ton, and 1½-ton trailers. The reefer truck maint section was similar, but added 15 refrigeration specialists.

The company's three truck platoons each had a platoon headquarters with a lieutenant platoon leader, platoon sergeant, assistant platoon sergeant, and a driver, along with a ¼-ton truck and trailer. Platoons had two cargo squads, each with a squad leader, five senior drivers, and 15 drivers. This organization provided each truck with a driver and an assistant ("shotgun"), but in reality there were seldom many assistants available. Light truck squads (2½-ton or 5-ton) had ten trucks (one with a winch) plus ten 1½-ton trailers. Medium cargo squads had ten 5-ton tractor-trucks and ten 12-ton cargo semi-trailers or 5,000gal fuel semi-trailers or 7½-ton reefer semi-trailers. Often the semi-trailers were reassigned to the battalion's trailer transfer point and allocated

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The 64th Trans Company motor pool at Pleiku, with 5-ton M54 cargo trucks parked and the *Iron Butterfly* passing through. Behind the flags are a massive 10-ton M123 truck-tractor and a 50-ton M15A2 tank transporter semi-trailer.

as needed. It was not uncommon for POL companies to place most of their fuel trailers in static tank farms and instead hauled 12-ton semi-trailers.

Gun trucks were allocated one or two per truck platoon. In some instances a gun truck "platoon" was formed, concentrating all the company's 3–6 gun trucks. Sometimes one of these trucks was a gun/maint truck and brought up the convoy's trail. This technique, however, served only to separate the gun-truckers from the platoons they protected. By making the gun-truckers part of the platoons, they lived and worked side-by-side with the task truck drivers and developed a sense of being part of the unit they protected, improving camaraderie and unit cohesion.

Transportation battalions with medium cargo and/or petroleum companies had a transportation detachment, trailer transfer point (TTP), TO&E 55-500, to operate a transfer facility in conjunction with line haul operations by receiving, segregating, assembling, and reporting vehicle and cargo arrivals and departures. TTPs also inspected documents, and dispatched loaded or empty trailers for convoys, provided emergency repairs on trucks and trailers, and maintained POL dispensing facilities for refueling vehicles.

The four artillery air defense machine-gun batteries (TO&E 44-58G) serving in Vietnam had 24 2½-ton trucks mounting quad-fifties, and were of course not Transportation Corps units, but sometimes assisted with convoy escort. The 142-man batteries were organized into three eight-gun platoons, each divided into four two-gun sections. One gun crew constituted a squad. They typically operated in two-gun sections.

A

1: WOODEN-SIDED GUN TRUCK

This early unnamed Truck 100 of the 442nd Trans Company, a 5-ton M54 gun truck, is fitted with a double-walled gun compartment constructed of 2x12in planks. These are higher than found on later gun trucks. Sandbags filled the space between the double walls, which overloaded the truck when wet. Some 0.25in plating is fitted to the cab doors and windshield. Armament is a 7.62mm M60 on an M36 ring mount over the cab (inset). A .50-cal M2 machine gun is mounted in the rear. Note the elaborate side mirrors mounted on the fenders, providing increased vision to the rear. At this time, gun trucks did not bear names and extravagant markings. A white five-point star (National Symbol) was painted on the side doors (14in from point to point), often atop the hood (20in), sometimes near the center of the front bumper (5in), and tailgate (6in). These were often painted over on later gun trucks.

2: HEXAGON COMPARTMENT GUN TRUCK

This unnamed 2½-ton M35 gun truck experimented with a hexagon gun compartment with a forward extension for an M60 on a pedestal. Some were mounted reversed, with the M60 compartment in the rear. A pedestal-mounted .50-cal serves as the main gun. The shield walls were fabricated from standard-issue side panels. The angular sides helped deflect bullets and fragments, but the small compartment was far too confining for the gun crew to operate in effectively. Armored shields are fitted on the cab doors and in the forward portion of the cargo bed. Trucks and trailers were identified by a white-painted 3in agency and registration number or "USA number" or "hood number," usually on the sides of the hood and tailgate or rear end: US ARMY 5E 8585 was the *Bounty Hunter's* USA number. The first number identified the class: ¼-ton trucks – "2"; ¾- and 1¼-ton – "3"; 2½-ton – "4"; and 5-ton – "5," including truck-tractors. The vehicle serial number was different and was found on the dashboard data plate.

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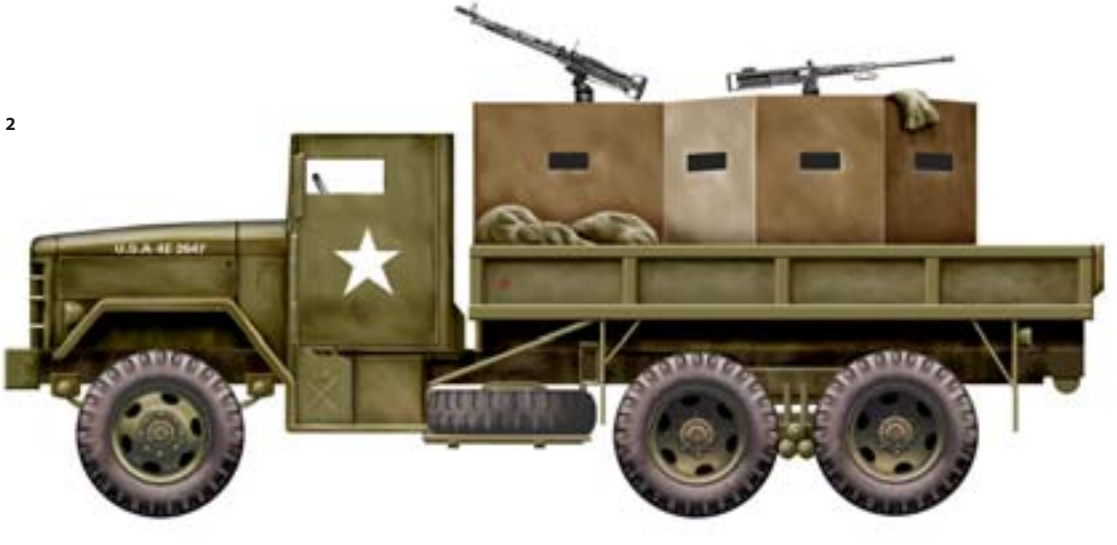

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Common truck and trailer models	
Trucks	**Descriptive name**
M35	2½-ton cargo truck ("deuce and a half")
M37B1	¾-ton cargo truck ("three-quarter-ton")
M49	1,200gal 2½-ton fuel service truck ("fueler")
M52	5-ton truck-tractor ("prime-mover" or "bobtail")
M54	5-ton cargo truck ("five-tonner")
M123	10-ton truck-tractor
M125	10-ton cargo truck ("prime-mover")
M151A1	¼-ton utility truck ("quarter-ton" or "one-five-one")
M543	5-ton medium wrecker
Trailers	**Descriptive name**
M15A2	50-ton 8-wheel tank transporter semi-trailer ("dragon wagon")
M101	¾-ton 2-wheel cargo trailer
M104	400gal 1½-ton 2-wheel water trailer ("water buffalo")
M105	1½-ton 2-wheel cargo trailer
M127	12-ton 4-wheel cargo semi-trailer ("stake and platform" – S&P)
M131	5,000gal 4-wheel fuel semi-trailer ("fuel tanker")
M349	7½-ton 2-wheel refrigerated semi-trailer ("reefer")
M416	¼-ton 2-wheel amphibious cargo trailer*
* Amphibious in that it floated with a full load when towed through water.	

Gun truck crews

Gun truck crews were selected from among the most experienced drivers. They volunteered and had to prove themselves worthy. For many, volunteering involved a lengthy process of badgering unit commanders and gun truck non-commissioned officers in change (NCOIC) –aka gun truck commander or crew chief – and awaiting an opening through casualties

The gypsy-like life style of gun-truckers is demonstrated by *Set Me Free* parked in its base. A folding cot sits on top and clothes dry on the radio antenna. The interior of M113A1 APCs were painted pale mint green (lighting effect makes this one appear light tan). Hatches that often remained open, such as the double top cargo hatch and the commander's cupola hatch, could be painted olive-drab.

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or rotation home. Prospective gun-truckers were naturally aggressive, wanting a piece of the action rather than settling for just being a passive driver. They yearned to be part of the elite within transport companies. To earn consideration, they had to prove themselves first by running dozens of combat convoys, gaining road war experience. They were interviewed by sometimes standoffish gun truck crewmen, and further proved themselves by hanging out with the off-duty crew and helping with the truck's maintenance. The crews were looking for highly motivated individuals, aggressive and enthusiastic, self-starters who didn't have to be told what to do. They were expected to fix immediately any deficiency found, to do any chore needed without being ordered. They were motivated enough that they did not attempt to avoid motor stables (routine vehicle maintenance) and were expected to stay on the job for as long as it took, all night if necessary. The gun trucks were ridden hard and fast and as many as possible had to be available for convoy duty. Prospective gun-truckers had to fit in with the close-knit crew, which had its own personality. Gun-truckers tended to be flamboyant, but generally kept to themselves when off-duty. They shared the same hooch (shelter), which proclaimed their truck's name.

Most gun-truckers possessed a 64-series military occupation specialty (MOS). MOS 64A light truck drivers were qualified to drive ¼-ton, ¾-ton, 2½-ton, and 5-ton trucks and held the rank of private first class (PFC) or specialist 4th class (SP4). MOS 64B heavy truck drivers were qualified to drive the same vehicles as 64As, but also 5-ton and 10-ton tractor-trailers. They were ranked SP4 and SP5, but could be PFCs. MOS 64C motor transport operators included truck squad leaders and assistant platoon sergeants (SGT), platoon sergeants and assistant truckmasters (ranked staff sergeant – SSG), truckmasters (sergeant first class – SFC), and company 1st sergeants (1SG). Most gun truck NCOICs were sergeants and staff sergeants, but sometimes SP4s.

Occasionally wheeled vehicle mechanics (MOS 63A and 63B) were on gun truck crews, and it was not uncommon for bored infantrymen (MOS 11B), tied down securing bases along convoy routes, to volunteer for the duty.

Every gun truck crewman could operate all of their truck's weapons and would rotate as drivers. All could handle any 1st echelon (operator) maintenance. They were trained to operate radios, perform first aid, call for artillery and air support, and medevac choppers. NCOICs began as drivers or gunners and were usually appointed to take over the truck by the rotating NCOIC. Crews numbered 3–6 men, the NCOIC (usually manning a gun), the driver, and 1–4 gunners. Mechanics might ride gun/maint trucks and also served as gunners. It was found that if the crew was too small it was impossible to maintain 360-degree observation, which was critical. At least three were needed in the "gun box."

Two truck drivers received the Medal of Honor, both posthumously: SGT William W. Seay, 62nd Trans Company, and SP4 Larry G. Dahl, 359th Trans Company (gun truck *Brutus*).

With their truck inspection completed, task truck drivers are briefed by the convoy commander before setting out on a dangerous and physically exhausting convoy through the Central Highlands. The acetate-covered board in his hand provides the standing operating procedures (SOP).

THE ARMY CONVOY SYSTEM

To understand the employment of gun trucks, a basic grasp of how tactical convoys were organized and run is necessary. A convoy was technically any grouping of three or more vehicles

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Crewmen rebuild their truck. The old floor and sidewall sandbags have been stacked in the center and double sidewalls made of aircraft landing mats are being installed. Gun truck crews constantly remodeled and upgraded their beloved trucks.

departing from the same point of origin for the same destination. The long-haul cargo convoys traveling through hostile territory ranged from 20 to 200 trucks and support vehicles. Convoys were organized into "serials," with a prescribed time interval between each. This system reduced bunching and the accordion effect when vehicles were forced to slow down on inclines, poor road surfaces, etc. Long-haul convoys initially used ten-truck serials escorted by a gun truck with five-minute intervals between serials. This organization was changed to 30-truck serials at 20-minute

B

1: *BOUNTY HUNTER*

The *Bounty Hunter* is an example of a gun truck built and operated by a non-Transportation Corps unit, in this case Company B, 815th Engineer Battalion (Construction) in II CTZ. It consisted of a sheet steel "short box" gun compartment on a 2½-ton M35. The cab was protected by an armored windshield and doors. A .50-cal was forward and an M60 in the rear. The M2's right shield was marked "FIRE EXIT." The cargo bed space aft of the gun compartment, besides spare tires, held C-ration cases, personal gear, and tools. The normal spare tire rack aft of the cab was not used, as it was slow to remove tires from there. The bumper number arrangement is non-standard and represents 35th Engineer Group, 815th Engineer Battalion, and Truck 43 of Company B.

2: *PSYCHOTIC REACTION*

Psychotic Reaction was a first-generation 2½-ton M35 gun truck fitted with minimal armor. The cargo bed and cab floors were protected by sandbags and initially there was no cab or windshield armor, but armored doors were later fitted. The cargo bed was protected by an armor kit with four pre-fab panels, each with a vision port, which were considered unnecessary. The right side, second from the front panel was fitted upside-down and cut down to allow the M60 greater depression. On the opposite side the third from the front panel was cut down on the left side similarly to give the gunners more freedom of movement. There was no forward armor for the cargo bed and there was a narrow opening in the rear. Trucks of this type were often refitted with .50-cal machine guns. *Psychotic Reaction* bears standard bumper markings: 8th Trans Group, 27th Trans Battalion, and Truck 15 of the 28th Trans Company. The ends of the bumper were painted, as were the bummer guide rods. Often, burned-out .50-cal barrels were used as unbendable guide rods in place of concrete reinforcing rods ("re-bar").

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1

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Engineer battalions sometimes modified 5-ton M51 dump trucks as gun trucks to escort their own convoys and protect work sites. *Invader II* mounted three .50-cal M2 machine guns, here removed. All 5-ton dump trucks, unlike most other 5-ton models, had winches.

intervals in 1968. There would be one gun truck per ten task trucks.[3] It was still a 1:10 gun truck to task truck ratio, but it concentrated more gun trucks with each serial to allow them to respond quicker to ambushes. There would be many variations of serial organization and size.

The convoy commander ("Charlie-Charlie") was typically a captain or lieutenant and serial commanders were lieutenants or experienced NCOs. Generally, lieutenants with less than two years' service did not lead convoys, but rode along with a veteran NCO convoy commander to gain experience. Convoy and serial commanders rode in radio-equipped and machine-gun armed "jeeps" – M151A1 utility trucks; sometimes these vehicles were lightly armored. These commanders did not always lead from the front, but the convoy commander would be in the middle and serial commanders tailed their serial. Such positioning allowed them to see what was going on ahead: arm signals from drivers, erratic speed, incoming enemy fire, truck breakdowns, etc. They would also run up and down the convoy's length to check on the situation, plus run ahead to ensure trucks made correct turns at intersections – with 100m between trucks hidden in dust or fog, it was easy for drivers to miss turns. Convoy and serial commanders and gun trucks had radios allowing contact with one another as well as with artillery and air support. The convoy commander would also be on the frequency of the security unit whose sector they were passing through, and would have to change frequencies in each sector. The convoy's radios did not have the range to reach their base, so the security unit had to be relied on to relay the convoy progress to the transportation headquarters. Arm signals and headlights were used for other signaling activities, as were colored smoke grenades and signal flares (red meant enemy contact).

The *Eve of Destruction* on convoy escort duty. The *Eve* today is displayed at the Transportation Corps Museum. It required at least three men to provide effective 360-degrees observation and man the weapons. Normally the truck NCOIC doubled as a gunner.

Convoys would be accompanied by a small number of support vehicles in the trail element: fuel truck, ¾-ton M43B1 ambulance, 5-ton M543 wrecker and/or 2½-ton or 5-ton cargo truck serving as a maintenance truck, and one "bobtail" per ten tractor-trailers.[4] Task trucks suffering breakdowns, flat tires (common), and battle damage were descended upon by a maint truck, wrecker, and bobtail as required. A gun truck or gun/maint truck would arrive for protection and its crew even assisting the driver with repairs and tire changes. Convoys of contracted Vietnamese tractor-trailers (usually of Japanese manufacture) were also organized and required escort.

Experienced drivers (pacesetters) headed each serial and would regulate the speed as required by road conditions. Typical speeds were 25–35mph, faster in high-risk areas. When passing through villages, the vehicles slowed to 15mph. Military Police (MPs) would actually issue speeding citations when convoys passed through their sectors, and there were instances when convoy commanders used their escorting MPs to keep other MPs away, rather than halting parts of their convoy and breaking it up. Night

[3] "Task trucks" were cargo trucks and truck-tractors with semi-trailers for hauling cargo.
[4] A "bobtail" was a 5-ton M52 truck-tractor without a semi-trailer tasked to pick up a semi-trailer from a broken-down or damaged tractor-trailer rig.

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convoys, which were smaller, would travel faster with headlights full on to limit their exposure to short-ranged enemy fire – the enemy had to position themselves close to roads at night if they hoped to hit a truck, and gun trucks could easily locate enemy firing positions from dust and muzzle flash. It was extremely difficult to hit a rapidly moving target with an rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) or recoilless gun.

An open-column convoy called for 100m intervals between trucks; often five truck lengths were specified. The vehicles would close up somewhat on extremely winding roads and at night. Heavier and slower vehicles were placed at the head of the convoy. However, knowing that the enemy would attempt to halt the ammunition and fuel trucks, they were sometimes placed at the rear of the convoy, so that if halted they would not trap other trucks. Additional gun trucks and other escorts would accompany this portion of a convoy. Drivers were not permitted to pass other vehicles unless the vehicles were broken down/damaged. The drivers were not to stop to assist halted trucks – the trail element took care of that. Yet there were many instances of drivers halting under intense fire to rescue drivers of damaged trucks. They even pulled up beside burning ammunition and fuel trucks to save their buddies.

Vietnamese civilians swarm between 2½-ton M35 cargo trucks of a stalled convoy hauling artillery ammunition. They sold drinks, snacks, and souvenirs and would bring their children to demonstrate they had no hostile intent.

As noted above, the "hardened convoy" concept was introduced in late 1967, with at least one gun truck (later increased) per 30 vehicles, armed and armored radio jeeps for control, pre-planned artillery support, and drivers trained to respond better to ambushes.

Convoys were planned 24 hours in advance. The battalion S-3 issued a list of trucks assigned to the convoy and the S-2 provided intelligence on recent enemy activity along the route. Task trucks were loaded with their cargo at depots and ammunition supply points, usually the day before the convoy departed. This procedure was specified by the quartermaster supply unit. The vehicles assembled in march-order at a marshalling area and lined up by serial. Engines were checked, along with fuel and fluid levels and brakes; loads were properly secured; cargo manifests confirmed; communications

The *Devil Woman* mounted five .50-cals, two on each side and one forward. The white-painted band on the rear tailgate says: "100 METER INTERVAL" in red; black was seen on other trucks. The Vietnamese child makes the M54 truck appear larger than it is. The truck sits on M8A1 aircraft landing mats, which were sometimes used for inner walls for double-walled gun truck gun boxes.

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TOP
The only time a truck was allowed to stop during a convoy was when mechanical breakdown or battle damage halted it. Here a 5-ton M52 tractor-trailer with a 12-ton M127 semi-trailer passes a damaged 5-ton M54 cargo truck outside a highway checkpoint.

BELOW
Otto was typical of ¾-ton M37B1 cargo trucks used by serial commanders and as convoy control vehicles. While agile and able to move quickly up and down the length of a convoy, they were too light to be effective gun trucks. They could only carry minimal armor and seldom anything more than M60s, here a twin mount in the cab and single gun in the rear.

checks made; and the convoy commander briefed all drivers on the route and procedures, scheduled stops, driving speeds, etc. For the most part convoy procedures were routine, following standing operating procedures (SOPs):

- Maintain speed and keep up with vehicles ahead.
- Maintain distance from the vehicle ahead; five truck lengths.
- Maintain communications and watch for signals.
- Weapons locked and loaded upon departure.
- Helmet and body armor on.
- Pay attention to surroundings and nearby civilian activity.
- Avoid civilian vehicles, but if they interfere to slow down the convoy for attack, hook them with a bumper and push them out of the way.
- In event of a breakdown, drivers stay with their vehicles and security will be provided.
- Do not pass vehicles unless they are disabled.
- If a disabled vehicle is blocking the road, push it out of the way if possible.
- If receiving fire, drive out of the kill zone.
- No stopping under any circumstances, unless suffering an incapacitating wound.
- Gun trucks are authorized to fire on anything suspicious. Task truck drivers only fire to defend themselves.

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When all was ready, the engines were cranked and there would invariably be minor problems that required fixing. If a truck could not be under way by the time the convoy's trail departed, it would be pulled out. Once out of the start point (SP), the gun trucks test-fired their weapons, providing a morale boast to the drivers.

In particularly dangerous areas, an Air Force forward air control (FAC) aircraft might be airborne to coordinate air cover ("Alpha-Charlie") and mark targets with white phosphorous rockets.[5] If the convoy was attacked, the FAC could call for Air Force close air support. Army scout helicopters might patrol the route and they could bring in gunships armed with rockets and machine guns. The entire convoy route could be covered by artillery fire from different firebases. Such overwhelming fire support was only called upon during a heavy ambush, if the gun trucks could not handle it. The main convoy counterambush tactic was for the task trucks to keep moving no matter what, and for the gun trucks to lay down suppressive fire.

Many ambushes were merely harassing in nature, as were mines and command-detonated explosives. Random sniper attacks were a nuisance. The enemy seldom attempted to halt an entire convoy and close in with a costly ground assault. They satisfied themselves damaging a few trucks and knocking out one or two. Of course, they took extra pains to destroy ammunition trucks and fuel tankers. Where roadside concealment permitted, enemy sappers would attempt close-in attacks with RPGs, grenades, and demolition charges. Most ambushes were of short duration.

The major supply routes had firebases and checkpoints spotted along them, and some cargo might be dropped off at these. This cargo included water trailers at remote checkpoints, where they were exchanged for dry ones. From these bases each morning, engineer teams would clear the road with mine detectors. Teams from each base would work toward each other, and once they linked up the road was opened to military and civilian traffic. Besides searching for mines and firing wires, they would dribble oil in potholes and worn spots to foil returning minelayers who might emplace mines – they would disturb the oil squiggles, providing a visual sign of tampering.

A 5-ton M543 medium wrecker accompanied each convoy. The 18ft hydraulically extended rotating boom had a 20,000lb capacity, plus there was a 40,000lb winch on the back and a 20,000lb winch on the front. There were four manually operated outriggers for heavy hoisting capabilities, a vice on the front bumper, trailer towing pental hooks on the front and rear, a tool box, and cutting torch. Besides towing damaged vehicles by lifting the front or rear wheels off the road as required, the boom was used to change truck engines and load cargo into task trucks.

[5] FAC aircraft included the O-1 Birddog, O-2A Skymaster, and OV-10A Bronco.

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A further means to counter ambushes was the "Rome plow." Engineer land-clearing companies equipped with 24 massive bulldozers fitted with special tree-splitting blades would level vast swathes of forest and push fallen trees into piles for burning. At least 50m wide swathes were cleared and then widened to 300–500m and even up to 1,000m in some areas. There were areas in the hills and mountains where the degree of slope or rugged terrain prevented clearing. The cleared belts, also called a "Rome plow," kept ambushers at a distance and made it difficult to conceal firing wires and for minelayers and sappers to sneak in close. Defoliants were sprayed along roads to keep foliage from growing back, and also on areas inaccessible to Rome plows.

THE NEED FOR GUN TRUCKS

According to the unit mission statement, a motor transportation company, as all other Army units, had the capability of "defending itself and its installations against hostile ground attack." All hands were armed with 7.62mm M14 rifles, except the six truck squad leaders armed with 40mm M79 grenade launchers and .45-cal M1911A1 pistols. Transportation company headquarters had two 7.62mm M60 machine guns with two more in each light truck squad (four per platoon) and one per medium truck squad (two per platoon). The M60s were only provided with ground tripods and no pedestal or ring mounts, according to the TO&E. This was rather limited firepower considering the threat truckers faced in Vietnam. Some units requested ring mounts, but supply depots often had none.

Truck companies were the first support units to receive 5.56mm M16A1 rifles to improve their close-range firepower. Six or 12 7.62mm machine guns spread between 60 trucks were totally inadequate, and was a major reduction from the World War II allocation of one .50-cal machine gun per four trucks. (The "fifties" of that era were mainly for air defense, but the "fifty" was now considered inadequate against high-performance aircraft.) The 1960s concept saw only a need for lighter M60s for defense against limited ground attack. Transport units were envisioned operating in the corps and army rear areas, and seldom forward of divisional rear boundaries on a conventional battlefield with front lines. The reality of Vietnam was different. The enemy directly threatened convoys; there were no rear areas in the conventional sense, and the front line was in the direction one was facing. In the case of long-haul truckers, their front line was on either side of their trucks. Their rifles and the few M60 machine guns lacked the necessary range and ability to penetrate dense foliage and trees used as cover by the enemy.

Glory Stompers II mounted three .50-cals and an M60, the latter being on the right side forward, an unusual arrangement. It might be that a fourth .50-cal was simply not available or was being repaired. In the foreground is a 50-ton M15A2 "dragon wagon" tank transport eight-wheel semi-trailer, which would be towed by a 10-ton M123 truck-tractor.

In conventional doctrine, if convoys needed additional protection it was provided by MP companies equipped with M60 machine-gun armed M151A1 jeeps. The MPs were overstretched with other missions, however, and lacked sufficient firepower and protection for convoy escort. There were never enough to go around. Another problem was that MPs viewed truck units as just an escort job. They had no identity within the transport unit; there was no "sheepdog" mentality of protecting "their" changes, the truckers. Units securing lines of communications were assigned sectors, so as

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a convoy progressed through it changed escort units. Procedures might be different between sectors and coordination with the convoy was not always the best. In mid-1967 the MPs were provided with 73 M706 (V-100) Commando armored cars, but these proved inadequate in firepower and capabilities compared to gun trucks and there were not enough for assignment to truck units.[6] There were well over 100 gun trucks by this time.

Military Police M706 Cadillac Gage Commando armored escort vehicle, commonly known as the "V-100," "the Duck," "the V." They were armed with twin 7.62mm M73 machine guns in the turret. These heavy armored cars were not as effective as gun trucks.

From late 1965, when US forces entered II CTZ, to late 1967, the local VC had mostly strived only to harass convoys with snipers and mines. Activity gradually increased, however. In some areas the enemy was making a concerted effort to harass and destroy convoys – this was especially true on Route 19 in Northern II CTZ. On September 2, 1967, an 8th Trans Group convoy returning from Pleiku was ambushed on a stretch of road known as "Ambush Alley." Thirty of the 37 trucks were destroyed or damaged, with seven dead and 17 wounded. The drivers were not trained to respond to such a devastating ambush and expended their rifle ammunition quickly. They also made the mistake of halting, which allowed the NVA to close in to destroy the trucks at their leisure. Halting in the kill zone was just what the NVA desired. Drivers had been trained in the States according to conventional doctrine, which specified, "If caught in an ambush, halt in the center of the road (shoulders may be mined). Take cover and return fire in the direction of the enemy, and be prepared to assault the enemy position and fight your way out." This was hardly acceptable in Vietnam. In addition, the trucks were traveling at close intervals. If they had been at 100m intervals only ten trucks would have been caught in the kill zone, rather than all 37. Efforts were made to increase security and the first crude gun trucks were soon deployed.

Big Bad John was an APC gun truck mounting a stripped-down M113A1 APC hull and fitted with a .50-cal machine gun on the commander's cupola and two shield-protected M60s on the sides. Many crew removed gun shields, as they restricted observation.

In some areas, particularly III CTZ, mechanized infantry battalions and armored cavalry squadrons secured lines of communications. ARVN and Korean infantry units also secured routes. This tactic was just as much for enabling civilian commercial traffic to get through to build the nation's economy as to secure convoy routes. Many of the roads were unpaved and rough, forcing trucks to travel slow and tanks and APCs could keep pace with them. Elements with APCs and tanks were spotted along and patrolled the main roads. Firebases and outposts were sited along the highways. The level terrain enhanced the tracked vehicles' mobility and gave them broad fields of fire. In II CTZ, especially after the main roads were paved, tracked vehicles could not keep up with trucks, which were following

[6] See Osprey New Vanguard 52: *Cadillac Gage V-100 Commando 1960–1971*

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The *Black Widow* mounted three .50-cal machine guns, one on each side and one in the rear. The small lettering on the side and rear cargo bed panels says: *HIEN NGMEO DUNG COI XE DOC BEN HONG* (trans. – Pedestrians and traffic please stand clear of truck sides), a warning often seen on gun trucks.

the concept that high speed was one of the best counter-ambush defenses. Besides, few mechanized units were available in II CTZ.

The 48th Trans Group in III CTZ opposed gun trucks, maintaining that the combat commander in the area was responsible for convoy security as per conventional doctrine. The extent of "hardening" trucks was limited to outfitting 20 2½-ton trucks with armored doors and an M60 on a ring mount. At this time, task trucks mounting a single machine gun were referred to as "gun trucks."

In late 1968, the NVA launched a major offensive in III CTZ and some combat units were shifted to the Saigon area, thought to be a main objective. On August 25, an 81-truck convoy departed Saigon on a long haul to Tay Ninh. The 48th Trans Group had not suffered any casualties for almost two years, and drivers had discarded helmets and armor vests. Cloud cover was

C

1: *CANNED HEAT*

Canned Heat belonged to the 363rd Trans Company, a medium cargo unit of the 57th Trans Battalion. The first *Canned Heat* was built on a 2½-ton M35 truck. It was later rebuilt on a 5-ton M54 using the same basic configuration. This was a single-walled truck, not double-walled. However, the forward higher side panels and front panel comprised two layers of 0.25in sheet steel. Armored cab doors were added later. *Canned Heat* mounted a .50-cal forward and another in the rear, plus an M60 on each side. The right-side gun compartment panel is shown depicting the difference in lettering from the left side. The 363rd possessed three gun trucks, *The Colonel*, *Pallbearers*, and *Canned Heat*. In January 1971, *The Colonel*, an APC gun truck, was damaged by an RPG-7 and a new non-APC gun truck named *The Mercenary* was built.

2: *WILD THING*

Wild Thing was built by Company D, 815th Engineer Battalion (Construction), first on a 2½-ton M35 in early 1969. In mid 1970 the gun compartment was mounted on a 5-ton M54 and soon extended forward, as shown here on Truck D14. *Wild Thing*'s armament was gradually increased until the vehicle became one of the most heavily armed gun trucks: a .50-cal on both sides, a twin M60 in the rear, and an M135 Minigun forward. The inset image shows its original "short box" configuration, mounted on a 2½-ton and then a 5-ton before it was extended forward. The open bed space forward of the gun compartment was unusual. Four spare tires could be carried in the back. The original "short box" version was armed with an M60 forward and a .50-cal on both sides. "St. Louis Mo" on the side is the home town of the NCOIC while "New York" on the leading edge of the hood was the driver's home.

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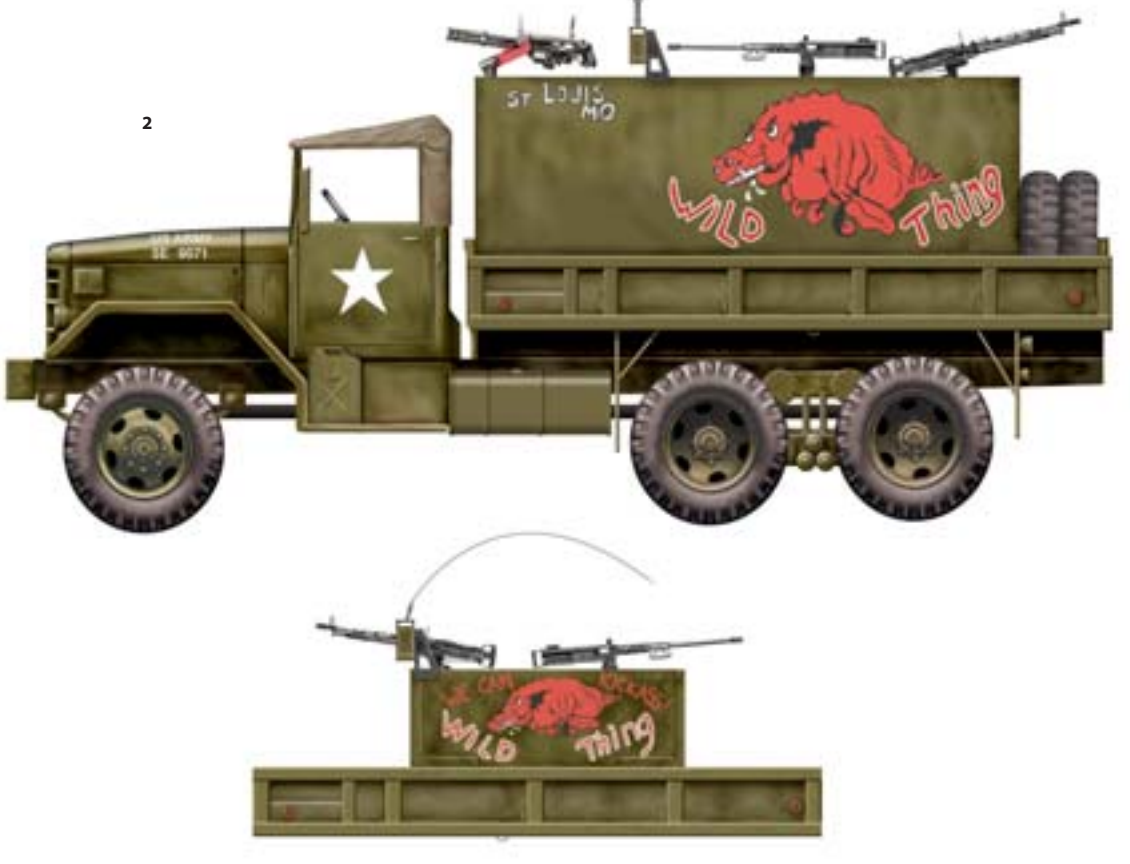

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A pair of .50-cal M2 machine guns mounted in an unidentified gun truck. Partly seen on the right edge is a 7.62mm M73 machine gun, little used on gun trucks. The M73 was normally used as a coaxial machine gun in M48A2 Patton tanks. It demonstrates the extent of scrounging undertaken by gun truck crews to obtain weapons.

low, limiting air support. Only eight MP jeeps escorted the convoy and the few infantry units in the area were tied down securing firebases.

The NVA sprang the well planned ambush along the road to Tay Ninh, separating the leading 30 light trucks and reefers in the front from the heavy ammunition and fuel semi-trailers in the rear. The head of the convoy continued on as prescribed. Two trailers of artillery ammunition in the rear were detonated, preventing the trucks from turning around on the narrow road. Fifty-one trucks were trapped in a mile-long kill zone and the NVA closed in. Two mechanized rifle companies responded, but in the end there were 30 dead, 45 wounded, and two prisoners taken among the drivers and relief force.

This event resulted in tighter coordination between MP units, convoys, and combat units securing the lines of communication. The MPs improved their escort capabilities. Yet the new group commander taking over less than three months later also opposed gun trucks, preferring the status quo of conventional doctrine. Drivers were required to wear protective gear and assistant drivers were assigned to ride "shotgun" to improve their close-defense capabilities.

Few ambushes could be classified as devastating, but the constant and persistent pin-prick attacks were taking their toll on trucks, drivers, and cargo. An ambush might last only 15–20 minutes before the enemy withdrew to avoid air attack and ground reaction forces. While the loss of a load of supplies on a 5-ton truck or a 12-ton tractor-trailer might not seem significant to the big picture, with millions of tons of munitions and supplies being shipped to Vietnam, the loss of a truck load of C-rations, sandbags, or medical supplies had at least a short-term impact on a receiving unit's combat operations. The harsh climate, long running hours, insufficient maintenance stand-down time, spare parts shortages, and lengthy lag time for replacement trucks to arrive made it difficult to maintain the desired 75 percent availability of task trucks for long-haul convoys. The heat, dust, and constant gear shifting on the rough, hilly roads were hard on engines, transmissions, brakes, and cooling systems. A light truck company with 60 5-ton trucks was fortunate to put 40 on the road – 60–80 percent of trucks were typically operational. More often than not, trucks were dispatched with minor deficiencies that would have dead-lined (side-lined) them Stateside. The truckers were wearing out also, running convoys 17–20 hours a day, almost every day.

Enough task trucks were being dead-lined or simply worn out and taken out of service without more being damaged or destroyed by enemy action. MP escort was insufficient and checkpoints and patrols could not adequately secure the miles of roads. Infantry units needed to be in the boondocks hunting the enemy's main forces and not tied down securing lines of communications harassed by local guerrillas. There is no point in establishing a combat force in an area of operations that is mainly occupied with securing its own base and supply route and only able to field a small offensive force.

This situation left only one viable option for motor transport units to meet the requirement of "defending itself and its installations against hostile ground attack." In 1967, crews first started scrounging .50-cal machine guns to install

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on task truck ring mounts to augment the M60s. This meant an assistant driver had to be provided to the machine-gun armed trucks, as the lone driver could not halt and return fire – stopping would only provide a stationary target, and block following trucks or force them to make a detour or bypass, resulting in a completely disorganized convoy. The "fifties" provided long-range fire and good penetration through vegetation and foxhole parapets. To protect the trucks and drivers better, the trucks were "hardened" further. This entailed rather crude expedient attempts to increase protection from small-arms fire, mortar fragmentation, and mines using locally available materials. Drivers wore steel helmets and body armor. Sandbags were placed around the vehicle to deflect mine blasts. Some trucks had steel plate affixed to the cab doors, over fuel tanks, and on the engine compartment's sides. (For a more detailed look at improvised truck armor, see 'Armor' section below).

Arming and hardening task trucks was only a limited defensive measure. Long-haul convoys needed mobile firepower that could engage ambushers with heavy and long-range fire. This led to the first crude gun trucks –"mobile fighting positions." They were envisioned as 2½- ton trucks hardened using locally available materials, with the company maintenance section providing the welding work and scrounged materials. Gun truck crews did much of the conversion work. Motor transport companies possessed between three and five 2½-ton trucks in the headquarters and maintenance section, and some additional rebuilt trucks were turned up. The armament was light, using authorized M60s and a few scrounged .50-cals.

Besides providing additional firepower, the concept of the new gun trucks was to allow them to separate from the convoy march order. They could move to the engagement area, bypassing task trucks and halt to return concentrated fire, which was much more accurate from a stationary truck, but they had to be protected from return fire. If enemy fire was light they could simply lay down suppressive fire as they passed without breaking formation. Such a response, of course, did not drive off or destroy the enemy. With increased firepower and protection, gun truck tactics evolved into more aggressive techniques intended to neutralize the enemy.

The effects of the impact of an RPG-2 HEAT warhead impact on *Li'l Angel*. The gear stowed between the gun compartment's double-wall could absorb much of the penetrative effect. However, the molten core and jet blast might penetrate into the other side of the interior. There might be some minor fragmentation spray inside, but for the most part crewmen were unharmed unless directly in the path of the jet-like blast. The gun compartment's open top prevented any over-pressure effect.

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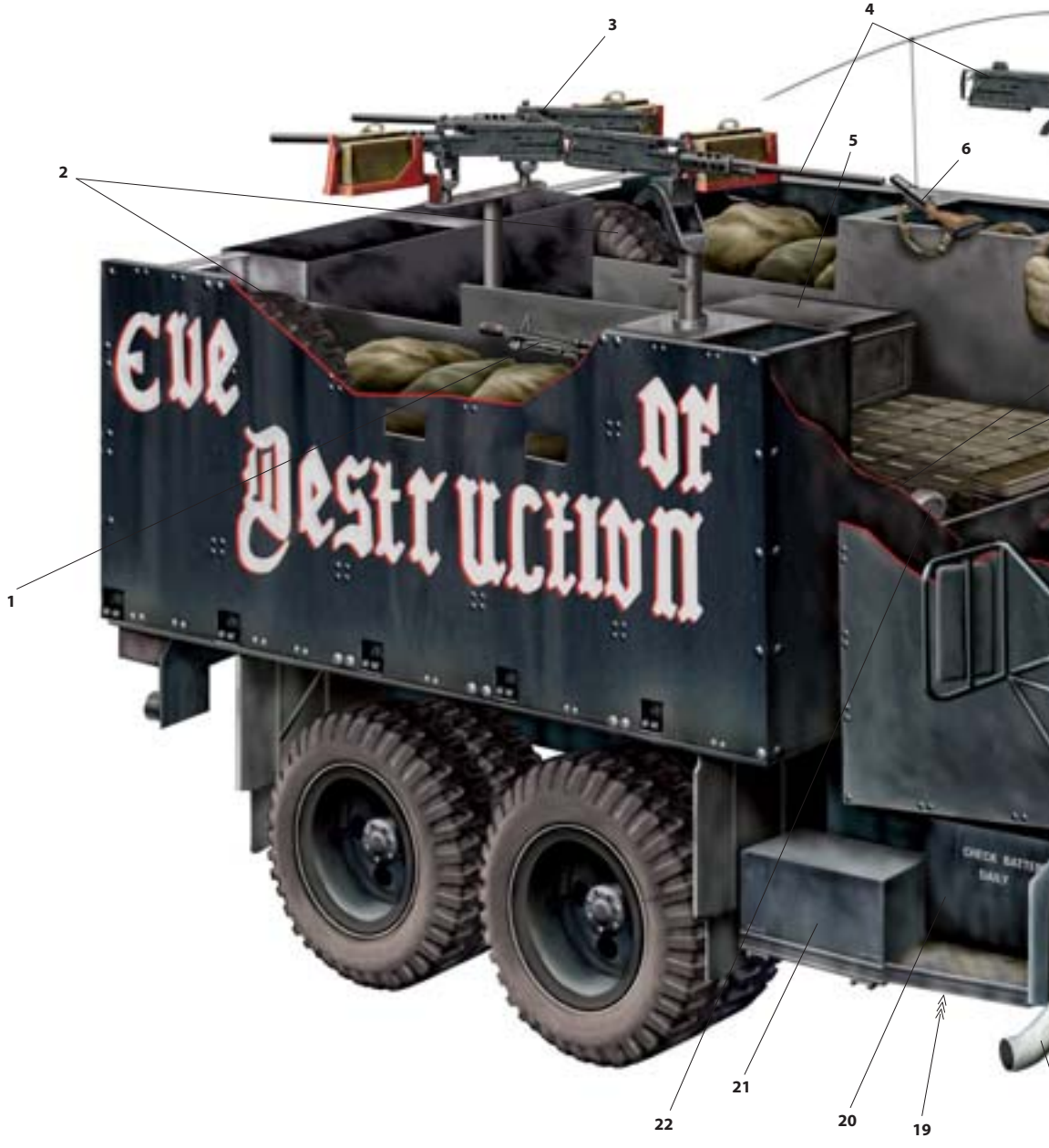
D *EVE OF DESTRUCTION*

One of the better-known gun trucks was the *Eve of Destruction*. It was built in 1968 by the 523rd Trans Company (Light Truck) (2½-ton), 124th Trans Battalion, 8th Trans Group. The company was later transferred to the 39th Trans Battalion, Army Support Command, Da Nang, and still later served under 26th General Support Group. *Eve* was first built on a 5-ton M54A1 chassis and later refitted to an M54A1C. In 1972 it was the only original gun truck returned to the United States from Vietnam. Initially on display outdoors, it was restored and is now displayed indoors at the Transportation Corps Museum at Ft Eustis, Virginia, bearing the bumper markings of the 124th Trans Battalion. Besides its name in white, the glossy black Gun Truck 214 displayed "To Charles with Love" on the front bumper, added late in its career. On the tailgate was a white bar inscribed "100 meter interval" in black. Some fittings were painted white.



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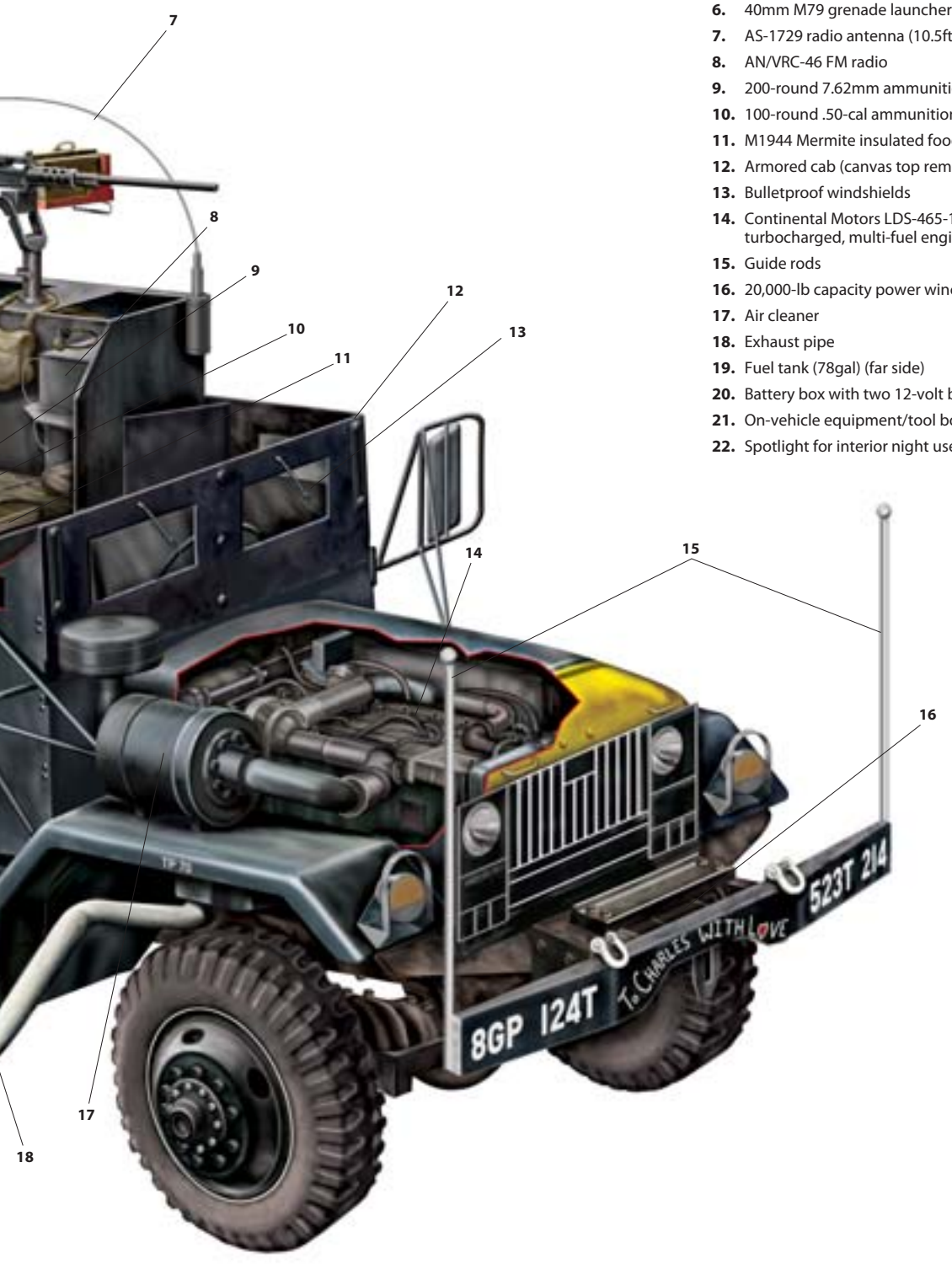

Key

1. Stowed 7.62mm M60 machine gun ("ditch gun")
2. Spare tires
3. Twin .50-cal M2 machine guns
4. Single .50-cal M2 machine gun
5. Footlocker for C-rations
6. 40mm M79 grenade launcher
7. AS-1729 radio antenna (10.5ft)
8. AN/VRC-46 FM radio
9. 200-round 7.62mm ammunition cans
10. 100-round .50-cal ammunition cans
11. M1944 Mermite insulated food container
12. Armored cab (canvas top removed)
13. Bulletproof windshields
14. Continental Motors LDS-465-1A 250hp, turbocharged, multi-fuel engine
15. Guide rods
16. 20,000-lb capacity power winch
17. Air cleaner
18. Exhaust pipe
19. Fuel tank (78gal) (far side)
20. Battery box with two 12-volt batteries
21. On-vehicle equipment/tool box
22. Spotlight for interior night use

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The enemy threat to convoys

Ambushes large and small; sniper engagements; stand-off attacks by recoilless guns, RPGs, mortars and machine guns; vehicle-activated and remotely controlled mines – all were common threats to convoys. The VC were responsible for most convoy attacks and were armed with a wide variety of small arms ranging from obsolete to modern. Most were communist bloc arms in 7.62mm. Others were captured Free World weapons of .30-cal, 7.62mm, and 5.56mm. Bolt-action, semi-automatic, and fully-automatic rifles and carbines were only of limited effectiveness, especially at longer ranges. It required a high volume of fire to disable even an unarmored truck. Of course there were lucky hits, inflicting serious damage and casualties.

Small-arms fire from over 300m was only marginally effective while machine guns could reach up to 1,000m. Machine-gun bursts, however, often dispersed widely, especially when firing on a moving target. Realistically, machine guns were not so effective at over 600m. An RPG-2 had only a marginal chance of hitting a moving target at 150m. The various recoilless guns had longer effective ranges, but the greater the range the less probability of a hit. Mortars, owing to the long flight time of their bombs and the widely dispersed moving vehicles, were very unlikely of making impact on something significant. Mortar rounds would simply be fired onto a road in the hopes that a truck would arrive at the point of impact at the same time the barrage struck.

RPG gunners attempted to move in close to attack trucks and would use any available concealment within 100m. They would also use M79 grenade launchers, but even a direct hit might not disable a truck, as most of the explosive force and fragmentation burst outward. Sappers sometimes directly assaulted trucks at pointblank range with automatic weapons, grenades, and hand-delivered demolition charges.

One of the most deadly weapons in the enemy's hands was the Soviet 12.7mm DShKM 1938/46 machine gun. This was mainly an antiaircraft weapon firing armor-piercing incendiary rounds. It had an effective range of up to 1,000m. Besides firing on convoys, they could be positioned to engage supporting aircraft and were equally lethal to helicopters. Captured US .50-cal machine guns were just as deadly.

Another serious threat was vehicle-activated and remotely controlled mines. The latter might be planted in the road itself or along the roadside. Paved roads, which were paved as much as a deterrent to mining as reducing road maintenance and wear on vehicles, made mining difficult. Remote-controlled mines and demolition charges were also problematic to plant, as the firing wires had to be concealed in a time-consuming procedure, and they were reasonably easy to detect by the sharp-eyed, especially where the roadsides were Rome-plowed.

The relatively light armor used on most gun trucks was adequate against small-arms fire and fragmentation, but the heavier weaponry such as the 12.7mm machine guns, RPGs, recoilless guns, and mines could seriously damage or destroy a gun truck, much less unarmored task trucks.

As suggested by examples above, the enemy would first attempt to knock out two vehicles in a portion of the convoy to trap the vehicles in between. Then they would concentrate their fire on the halted trucks, but would often be prepared to shift their fire to arriving gun trucks. Knowing the gun trucks would unleash a high volume of fire, they dug fighting positions and prepared overhead camouflage to prevent detection by helicopters.

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GUN TRUCK DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Other than some armor kits developed in the States, virtually all gun truck development occurred in Vietnam and was conducted at unit level. There was no standardization and units built, modified, and improved their gun trucks from lessons learned on deadly convoys.

In the summer of 1967, the XO of the 8th Trans Group determined that convoys needed improved protection. Ring mounts were unavailable for trucks, so a few trucks had sandbag protection added in the back, an M60 fitted, and a gunner provided. The 27th Trans Battalion built the first two gun trucks along these lines. They were still inadequate. A maintenance warrant officer found steel plates in a disposal yard and four or five trucks had plating installed on their sides, along with shielded cab doors. They generally had one or two M60s. Steel plating and ring mounts were requisitioned from the States and did not arrive until September 1967.

Gun truck chassis

Both the 2½-ton and 5-ton cargo trucks used as gun truck chassis were fielded in the early 1950s. Both were classified as 6x6 ("six-by") vehicles in that they had three axles with six wheels, even though the rear two axles mounted dual tires for a total of ten. The rear axles were powered all the time and power could be applied to the front axle for better traction, especially on mud, sand, loose gravel, soft or rough ground, and gave improved stability on wet roads. They had a 12.5in and 10.5in ground clearance, respectively, and could wade 30in-deep water. Both were 96in wide. The 2½-ton offered a 36ft turning radius and 39ft 3in for the 5-ton. Top speed was 55–60mph, but this was pushing it.

Both vehicles had a similar layout. The 5-ton was 11 percent larger than its smaller brother, with the engine compartment forward (which included

The *Good Guys*, a 5-ton M54 gun truck of the 545th Trans Company, 27th Trans Battalion, assigned to Army Support Command, Qui Nhon (SCQN). The truck beside it is the *Play Boys*. Note the pair of air horns beside the radio antenna. Horns were used to order Vietnamese civilian vehicles out of the way.

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The *Pandemonium* was another heavily armed M54 with a .50-cal forward, one on each side and a twin mount on the rear. Note the location of the open port in the side doors. The driver had to lean forward to look out the sides, but was protected from fire while sitting upright. The ports' location allowed him to see the side-view mirrors. The OVE box aft of the cab has been removed, probably because of damage.

an air compressor for tire inflation and to operate air brakes), and a roomy cab. Fuel tanks were on both sides, below the cab doors, on the 2½-ton (50gal), and aft of the cab on the left side of the 5-ton (78gal).

The spacious cargo compartment had low steel sidewalls, removable wooden sideboards, folding removable troop benches, a drop tailgate, and could be fitted with wooden bows and a canvas cover. The cover was usually removed in Vietnam to allow oversize cargo to be carried and for quicker loading/unloading. The cargo bed was 50in above ground on the 2½-ton and 56in for the 5-ton. The height made cargo loading/unloading difficult, but allowed a gun truck's weapons to be mounted high. A low profile is desirable

E

1: ARMORED COMMAND M151A1 UTILITY VEHICLE

Convoy commanders and serial commanders used radio-equipped (AN/VRC-46) ¼-ton M151A1 utility vehicles to "ride herd" on their convoys. Elaborate armor kits with bulletproof windshields and quarter, rear, and door panels were provided. The windshield and doors were fitted with removable 3in thick bulletproof glass; it was often removed from the doors to improve ventilation. Two large rearview mirrors were fitted above the windshield. Two pedestal-mounted M60s were often carried, but sometimes only one gun was fitted. The weight of the armor, guns, ammunition, and radio, plus the two- or three-man crew, placed a great deal of weight on a vehicle designed to carry only 500lb off-road.

2: *DAUGHTER OF DARKNESS*

The *Daughter of Darkness* was a ¾-ton M37B1 cargo truck fitted with armor and two side-mounted M60s, sometimes referred to as a "beep." It possessed armored cab doors and a recessed back panel allowing space for a spare tire. *Daughter of Darkness* was used by the 523rd Trans Company, 54th Trans Battalion as Truck 200. An M60 was mounted on each side and an M60D aircraft machine gun in the cab. The ¾-tonners were used as control vehicles and sometimes by serial commanders, being introduced in 1968. While lightly armed, they augmented the big gun trucks' firepower and would stay with the convoy while the large trucks engaged ambushers. They were no substitute for the big gun trucks, though.

3: LINE HAUL RVN TAB

The Line Haul RVN Tab was approved by US Army, Vietnam, on November 25, 1968 for wear by combat convoy truck drivers, including gun truck crews, in recognition of the risks they ran. It was to be worn over the unit patch on the left shoulder, usually the 1st Logistical Command ("Outhouse on a Hill"), seen here, or the US Army, Vietnam, patch. There was no "full-color" version of the tab and they were not supposed to be worn outside Vietnam, but some veterans continued to wear them over their combat patch on their right shoulder. Few units were aware of the made-in-Vietnam tab's existence and it was not widely worn.

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The Rebel boasted a gun box of unique design, being angled outward. This might help deflect bullets downward, but its main purpose was to provide more operating room for the gunners. This design saw little use, as it was wider than normal trucks and required more space to bypass halted vehicles. *The Rebel* was armed with .50-cals forward and in the rear and an M60 on each side. Note the boarding ladder on the back and the armor vest.

for most armored fighting vehicles, but high-mounted weapons provided gun trucks with better fields of fire and observation. Operating in the open on roads, it was unnecessary for them to "hide."

The cab held a separate adjustable driver's seat beside a two-man bench seat (often removed from gun trucks) with a removable canvas top, fold-down windshield, and side doors with roll-down windows. A spare tire was carried under the frame of the left side aft of the cab on the 2½-ton and against the left forward end of the cargo bed on the 5-ton. Approximately one in ten trucks had a power winch on the front bumper. All had a trailer towing pental. The differences between variants mainly reflected different engine and transmission models. Regardless of model, all transmissions were five-speed.

2½-ton M35-series cargo trucks

The US Army has used 2½-ton trucks since before World War II in the form of the General Motors Corporation (GMC) CCKW series. This was replaced by the GMC M135/M211 series in 1950, which was used through the Korean War. Design of the REO Motor Car Company's G-742 series, the M35 being the cargo version, began in 1949, with production commencing the following year. The 2½-ton truck or "deuce-and-a-half" became iconic wihtin Army logistics, and besides the cargo versions there were a truck-tractor (little used), 1,000gal water tanker, 1,200gal fuel service tanker, light wrecker, crane, missile launcher, shop and medical vans, expansible van, electronics repair, dump, pole derrick, power auger, boring and pole-setting, and pipeline repair trucks.

There were three versions of the cargo truck, besides the short-lived M34, which had larger-diameter single wheels on the rear axles. As well as by REO (pronounced "Rio"), they were built by Kaiser Jeep Corporation and AM General until 1971. The M35 had an REO Gold Comet or Continental OA331 inline-six gasoline engine, the M35A1 had Continental LDS-427-2 and the M35A2 had Continental Motors Company, Hercules, or White Motor Company LDT-465-1D, respectively, multi-fuel engines (diesel, gasoline ["mogas"], jet fuel [JP-4], kerosene, heating oil), both 135hp. (The M35A2C with a diesel engine was a post-Vietnam development.) The M35A1 and M35A2 were mostly used for gun trucks and could not be differentiated externally; the latter were the most widely used. The "deuce" had a range of about 400 miles and a 13,443lb empty weight. It could double its 2½-ton off-road capacity on improved or paved roads. The truck was 21ft 9in long overall with a 7ft 4in x 12ft 3in cargo bed.

5-ton M54-series cargo trucks

The "five-tonner" G-744 series was a scaled-up model of the 2½-ton. It was developed in 1951 and built by GMC and Kaiser from 1953. The M54 had a Continental R6602 gasoline engine, while the M54A1 and M54A2 had a Mack ENDT-673 diesel or turbocharged Continental Motors Company LDS-465-1A, respectively, both multi-fuel engines developing 205hp. Other versions included the M52 truck-tractor, 2,500gal water tanker, medium wrecker, dump, shop van, expansible van, bridge carrier, missile launcher, logging, and 800gal asphalt distribution trucks. On improved and hard-surface

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roads, the five-tonner could double its load like a "deuce," but it was more practical to limit it to 7 tons. The 5-ton's range was about 500 miles and had an empty weight of 19,480lb. The truck was 26ft 1in long overall with a 7ft 4in x 4ft cargo bed, making it 21in longer than the deuce's bed.

The five-tonners offered considerable improvement over the deuce-and-a-half as a gun truck. They could carry much heavier loads of armor, weapons, and ammunition owing to the higher capacity and horsepower, especially when moving off-road where the ground was rougher and often muddy. A problem encountered with 2½-ton gun trucks was that when the convoy was returning from a lift mission, the task trucks, whether cargo or semis, were empty while the gun trucks were still weighed down with armor, guns, and ammunition. They suddenly became the convoy's slow-movers. Five-ton gun trucks proved to be more effective in these situations, but fewer were available as they had to be drawn from the task truck inventory rather than using 2½-tonners, which served in transport units as support vehicles. Using the five-tonners as gun trucks reduced the unit's available cargo carriers, which delivered the unit's primary logistical mission.

Armor

A variety of materials were employed to "armor" gun trucks. Most materials were locally acquired, although some armor kits were provided through supply channels.

Sandbags were placed on the cab's floor (allowing space for the accelerator, brake, and clutch pedals, and gearshift lever), a layer on the cargo compartment's bed, and sometimes on running boards below the doors and on front fenders to deflect mine blasts. One or two layers might also be placed atop the folded-down windshield, and sometimes the windshield was removed altogether. More often, gun trucks retained the windshield and canvas cab to give the hardworking driver protection from the elements and protect him from the muzzle blast of guns firing over the driver's

The Maverick had armored doors with replaceable 2in thick bulletproof glass panels, the same type used in the windshield. Note the exhaust pipe located in the wheel well. Some trucks had a tall vertical exhaust more beneficial for fording.

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compartment. Fuel tanks often remained unprotected – these actually proved difficult to ignite by small-arms fire.

The cab floor of a 5-ton cargo truck required 14–20 sandbags, while a 2½-ton needed 12–18. One-hundred-plus sandbags were needed for one layer on a 5-tonner's cargo bed. The problem with sandbags was that they absorbed rainwater, making a 40lb sandbag about one-third heavier. Even without added water, 140 dry sandbags equal 5,600lb, almost three tons. This weight drastically reduced the transportable cargo weight and space and placed greater strain on engines and transmissions, and cooling and suspension systems. Sandbags were quickly worn out by foot traffic, while vehicle vibration shook them apart, so they had to be frequently replaced. Vibration actually shook dust from the bags, fouling weapons and making life miserable for the crew. Some trucks had 0.25–0.5in steel plate affixed to the cab doors, over fuel tanks, and on the sides of the engine compartment.

The first gun compartments or "gun boxes" were made of 2x10in and 2x12in planks. These were usually double-walled, with 12–14in between them. Often the inner wall was made of pierced steel planking (PSP) (15in x 10ft) or solid M8A1 lightweight landing mats (17.5in x 11ft 9.75in) and bolted to a timber framework. The space was filled with sandbags, adding a great deal of weight.

Mild steel plate was soon being used for the outer layer of armor with PSP/landing mats for the inner. It was rare that the plate was actual armor-hardened steel. Thicknesses included, 0.25, 0.37, 0.5, 0.63, and 0.75in, the thinner sheets being more common. Rather than sandbags, the space between the double walls was packed with C-ration and soft drink cases, 5gal water cans, ammunition cans, personal gear in duffle bags, litters, folding cots, tools,

1: *KING COBRA*

King Cobra was typical of the APC gun trucks built by the 8th Trans Group, a stripped down M113A1 APC hull mounted on a 27th Trans Battalion 5-ton M54. While overly heavy and inflicting much strain on the truck, as well giving the vehicle a high center of gravity, the APC hull fit nicely into the cargo bed, although it projected from the rear, but no more than the lowered tailgate. The hull was held in-place by turn-buckle-tightened cables. *King Cobra* mounted a .50-cal in an armored cavalry assault vehicle (ACAV) tub turret, plus two more "fifties" on either side of the open top cargo hatch. Some APC gun trucks mounted a single .50-cal at the rear of the top cargo hatch. Others mounted two M60s on either side and were fitted with ACAV gun shields. The cab doors, back, and windshield were armored. The gun tub was painted in the American flag colors and the APC hull was black. Excessive weight and top-heaviness caused most to be withdrawn in 1970, although a few remained in use in I CTZ. From late 1969, 8th Trans Group trucks had a yellow band painted on the hood's nose so they could be identified from the air and differentiated from Quartermaster unit trucks with white noses.

2: "QUAD FIFTY" MACHINE-GUN TRUCK

Four artillery air defense machine-gun batteries operated in Vietnam and often escorted convoys, usually in sections of two guns, but spotted separately in the column. The M45 trailer wheels were removed and the M55 quad mount braced in the 2½-ton M35 truck bed by a timber framework. The only armor was a front panel with angled wing panels to the side. The "fifties" could not fire forward and the thin forward armor provided a place for the crew to duck into. An M60 was often mounted on the forward panel. Each truck also carried an M79. The machine-gun shield was frequently removed to allow easier and faster reloading and barrel changing. Spare barrels were carried forward. The rounded portion of the gunner's compartment was armored and in some cases a rectangular armor panel was placed on the mount's rear to protect the gunner's back, and armored cab doors were installed on some trucks. Some transportation units acquired M55s, but usually mounted them on 5-tonners. Like more conventional gun trucks, the cargo bed was paved with 100-round ammunition cans, often over a layer of sandbags. Quad fifty batteries were: E-41st, G-55th, D-71st, and G-85th Artillery.

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The *Highland Raider's* – the name indicating that the vehicle operated in the Central Highlands –belonged to the 64th Trans Company. It was an example of an early wood-sided gun box truck. It would have double wooden walls filled with sandbags. When wet the sandbags drastically increased the truck's weight. This truck mounted a .50-cal in the rear and two M60s forward.

etc. Rifles, grenade launchers, and other "ditch guns" were laid atop the stowed gear. The double-spaced armor back-filled with the afore-listed items was effective in stopping bullet penetration and in dispersing the blast of RPG and recoilless gun shaped-charge projectiles. Even the filled ammunition cans affected the blast and seldom detonated themselves. Many trucks used thicker armor, especially if actual hardened armor was available, and dispensed with the double walls, providing more space within the gun box. Gunners needed sufficient room to traverse their weapons to the full extent and not interfere with each other. Sometimes single-wall gun boxes had small vision ports cut in them, but these were found to be unnecessary. Seats removed from other vehicles were often fitted in the gun compartment.

Most gun boxes were rectangular, but a few were hexagon-shaped with a small rectangular extension for another machine gun; these proved to be too confining. The gun box did not always fill the cargo compartment. There was often a 3–4ft space between the box's rear wall and tailgate – the "short box." This provided space for spare tires, tools, a towbar, and other maintenance gear on gun/maint trucks. The gun box floor was usually thinner steel plate or planking, or a combination of both. The gun compartment's floor was also covered with a layer of ammunition cans, which helped protect against mines. As with projectiles, a mine detonation would not explode the ammunition. Steel plating might be added to the cab floor, doors (usually with a vision slit), and the sides of the engine compartment – here they were often removed because they caused engine overheating.

Add-on armor kits were developed in the United States and sent to Vietnam in September 1967. They were used, but were not well liked. They included four or five 0.25in plate panels for the sides, a tailgate panel, and one for each cab door. The plates were attached to the outside of the cargo bed's sideboards. A small rifle firing/vision port was cut in each side plate near the top. The ports were considered unnecessary and were sometimes installed upside-down with the ports at the bottom over the steel cargo bed side panels. Windshield plates with small windows were provided and had pull-down steel covers with small slits, but they restricted vision and were also little used. From 1969 new doors and windshields were fitted with 2in thick bulletproof glass. The window panels were fitted in brackets and could be easily replaced. Gun shields were not used as they restricted vision.

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The most heavily armored of the gun trucks were the "APC trucks" fielded in September 1968 by the 8th Trans Group. These were 5-ton trucks with stripped-down M113A1 APC hulls mounted on the back.[7] The tracks, road wheels, suspension, engine, transmission, drive train, fuel tanks, and other unnecessary gear were stripped out to reduce weight as much as possible. Electrical and intercom systems were retained. The hulls still proved too heavy and were hard on the truck's suspension, engine, and transmission. Turns had to be made carefully owing to the extremely high center of gravity, limiting the vehicles' maneuverability. Most were withdrawn by 1970. They were usually fitted with the bow forward, but the APC hull was nose heavy and a small number were mounted with the bow to the rear, placing much of the weight over the rear wheels. The M113A1 hull was made of aluminum armor: front, rear and top – 1.5in; upper sides – 1.75in; lower sides and floor – 1.25in. They usually had the armored cavalry assault vehicle's (ACAV) tub-like .50-cal turret on the commander's cupola. The top cargo hatch remained open to allow access to other guns.

The crews generally wore steel helmets and body armor. It is sometimes claimed they shunned such protection, this being based on accounts of bravado and photos taken in bases and marshalling areas. Some crewmen did not use helmets and "flak vests," but most did, along with protective goggles.

Gun truck armament

Armament was scrounged from various sources, the most common being rebuilt guns turned in by combat units. These were damaged weapons direct-exchanged (DX'ed) for replacement weapons, the damaged weapons picked up by the truckers and delivered to depots. Some did not make it back, however, and were repaired by the unit armorer. There was no limit on reasonable spare parts requests.

The number of machine guns varied from two to six, with three or four being common. Ideally the guns would provide 360-degree coverage from multiple guns, especially covering the vehicle sides. Some trucks mounted a mix of .50-cals and M60s. From 1969, many mounted all .50-cals, with a few retaining an M60. A Minigun might have replaced a .50-cal, but these were scarce. Seldom was more than one Minigun mounted.

Gun truck armament was not static; it frequently changed when crews were able to obtain additional weapons. The truck *Poison Ivy* started off with three .50-cals and an M60, but later became the most deadly gun truck with four Miniguns and a twin .50-cal. More common configurations included *The Private*, with a twin .50-cal and two M60s, and *The Misfits* had a single .50-cal and two twin .50-cals. Another truck had an M60 on both front corners

The M55 "quad fifty" mount was power-operated and besides being mounted on air defense battery 2½-ton M35 trucks, they were occasionally placed on transportation company 2½-tonners and 5-tonners. The gunner's position was lightly armored. The weapon could generate an awesome amount of firepower, as evidenced by the spent cases, but required a six-man crew. The 400-round ammunition cans bear the truck's bumper number.

[7] See Osprey Vanguard 34: *The M113 Series*

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The Untouchable mounted a single .50-cal forward and another in the rear, plus had a 7.62mm M134 Minigun on each side. It additionally had two M60 machine guns stowed inside as "ditch guns." Next to the 78gal fuel tank on the cab step is a 5gal fuel can.

and a single .50-cal center rear. When the M60s were found less than effective they changed to three .50-cals. APC trucks mounted a .50-cal on the commander's cupola and one on each side of the top cargo hatch or just one at the rear.

The primary weapon was the stalwart Browning .50-cal M2 machine gun.[8] The "fifty" was an ideal weapon. It offered a 2,000m range, although the standard handheld free gun mounting was usually only effective up to 1,000m, but this was sufficient as most engagements were from 100–500m. Yet accuracy was not really an issue – the "fifty" was an area-fire weapon. It was seldom that pinpoint targets could be identified. Instead, the "fifty" was used to hammer tree lines and suspected enemy positions. The M2's real value was the gun's ability to penetrate through double layers of sandbags, 16in diameter trees, 3ft of loose earth parapet on a foxhole, to say nothing of it busting through dense brush and bamboo. The 100-round belts were loaded with a mix of two incendiary, two armor-piercing-incendiary, and one armor-piercing-incendiary-tracer or one tracer and four steel-cored ball rounds. Ammunition was held in a 100-round metal box fitted on the left side of the gun. The M2's rate of fire was 450–600 rounds per minute (rpm) and the gun was usually fired in 3–10 round bursts. The gun weighed 84lb and was 65in long with a 45in barrel. A couple of spare barrels were carried and could be changed in a few minutes. M2s were mounted on both single and twin mountings on gun trucks using the M31C pedestal or locally fabricated mounts.

The "fifty" was also fitted to the M55 quad machine-gun mount. This was a power-operated mount on the M45 two-wheel trailer. A gasoline engine powered the electric motor traversing and elevating the guns. This devastating weapon was to be towed by a 2½-ton truck and 24 were assigned to artillery air defense machine-gun batteries. They proved to be an ideal defensive and suppressive fire weapon in Vietnam. Mainly used to defend bases, they were also applied for convoy escort. While all of the guns could be fired simultaneously, firing was normally undertaken alternating the two upper and two lower guns, allowing longer sustained fire. In Vietnam, the trailer's wheels were removed and the mount fitted in the truck's cargo bed, providing better

[8] See Osprey Weapon 4: *Browning .50-caliber Machine Guns*

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King Cobra of the 597th Trans Company. The company's APC gun trucks were numbered in the 100 series. "Dirty Third" is painted on the front bumper and "Mike" on the side of the commander's turret – the truck NCOIC's name.

mobility and allowing the gun to be fired on the move. These trucks were also armed with an M60 machine gun and an M79 grenade launcher and manned by a crew of six (squad leader, gunner, driver, three ammunition handlers).

In a few instances, transport units acquired an M55, mounting it on one of their own 2½-ton or 5-ton trucks. The crew of six was difficult for undermanned transport units to supply, however. Another problem was that the guns' minimum depression was restricted owing to the cargo bed's side panels. Nor could the guns fire in the forward quarter arc because of the cab, a considerable gap in its field of fire. For effective convoy defense, 360-degree fire was necessary.

There is an old myth claiming it is illegal to use antiaircraft weapons against troops, including the .50-cal. There is no regulation in the US armed forces that says this is illegal. In fact, every US manual on air defense guns, including the .50-cal, has/had a section on engaging ground targets including personnel. Absolutely nothing in the Hague Convention or other accords even remotely suggest it is forbidden.

Mighty Minnie of the 64th Trans Company, 54th Trans Battalion, spits out 2,000rpm from its 7.62mm M134 Minigun. Miniguns were originally mounted in helicopter gunship chin turrets, so crews had to fabricate their own truck mounts. The 3.2hp DC electric motor can be seen forward of the gunner's left hand. It is often claimed that gun truck crews shunned helmets and armor vests. This was true only in rare cases.

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It Don't Mean Nothin belonged to the 240th Quartermaster Battalion (Petroleum Operations) of Army Support Command Qui Nhon. As such its hood nose had a white band. A gunner fires an M79 grenade launcher at a sniper. Note the M60 on the hood.

The Untouchable's driver concentrates on the road ahead. He wears an H-251/U radio headset connecting him to the truck's radio. He cannot speak on it, but can monitor radio traffic. The NCOIC could speak on the radio. Note the ample supply of 40mm M79 grenade launcher high-explosive rounds. The passenger seat has been removed, as was common to provide more stowage space.

The 7.62mm M60 machine gun was the standard infantry light machine gun. It had only been in the field since 1959. The gun threw out 550rpm up to 1,000m. It weighed 23lb, was 43.75in in length with a 25.6in long quick-change barrel. Ammunition was provided in 100-round belts issued in two cardboard cartons in a metal can. The two belts could be linked together and contained one tracer to four ball rounds.

M60s initially armed gun trucks as they were readily available. It was soon found that they lacked the firepower necessary for ambush suppression, as they were not as effective as the .50-cal at longer ranges, especially in regards to penetration. It was not long before crews began replacing their M60s with M2s. Some crews retained at least one M60 for close-in defense. Some M60D helicopter flexible machine guns, with spade grips instead of a butt stock, were also used and sometimes fitted to twin mounts.

The 7.62mm M134 machine gun or Minigun was an electrically operated six-barrel rotary Gatling-type gun. These were recovered from downed gunships or salvaged from DX'ed weapons. The Minigun had a selective rate of fire of 2,000 or 4,000rpm. The 4,000-round rate was impractical for ground targets and wasted ammunition. While firing the same ammunition as the M60 with the same penetration limitations, its insanely high rate of fire literally allowed it to chew through dense vegetation. The volume of fire, the continuous streak of red tracers, and the chainsaw-like shriek of its voice had a distinct psychological effect. For so much firepower the Minigun was relatively compact, being 31.5in long with 22in barrels, and it weighed 50lb. The gun was powered by a 3.2hp DC electric motor requiring two 12-volt automotive batteries. US military ground vehicles and helicopters used a 24-volt electrical power system to operate the vehicle systems, radios, and other equipment. It tended to be temperamental and electrical malfunctions were common. Gun truck crews built large capacity plywood or sheet metal ammunition boxes.

The 40mm M79 grenade launcher was a valuable weapon and each gun truck carried at least one, often used by the driver, but any crewman could operate it. Transportation companies were normally allotted only one per truck squad and one in the maint section, to total seven. The "blooper" or "thumper" was ideal for engaging personnel targets and suspected positions to 150m for point targets and up to 300m for area targets. They were used for reconnaissance-by-fire, blind-firing against concealed positions, and close-in attacks. The compact M79 was only 29in long and weighed 6.45lb, but was capable of firing a high-explosive/fragmentation round with a 5m lethal radius, the grenade scattering 300 fragments as it detonated.

Sometimes the VC attempted to move in close into roadside ditches and, so to

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speak, "hug" the gun trucks, attacking them with demolition changes, grenades, and RPGs. Machine guns could not be depressed sufficiently to engage the enemy at pointblank ranges. To counter this, gun-truckers acquired a variety of close-defense weapons referred to as "ditch guns". These included handheld M60s, M79 grenade launchers with the high-explosive round armed at 14–27m, 12-gauge pump-action shotguns firing buckshot, M14 or M16A1 rifles, and .45-cal M3A1 "grease guns," as well as fragmentation grenades.

The rear interior of the *Eve of Destruction* displays its twin-fifty mount with two spare barrels in a rack and a 5gal oil can. In the side compartments can be seen the butt of the M60 "ditch gun," armor vests, helmets, and spare tires. The floor is paved with 100-round .50-cal cans. Note the inner wall panel and the crude blowtorch cutting on its edges.

Drivers were initially armed with M14 rifles and typically carried only five 20-round magazines. The bulky rifles were difficult to fire from inside a truck cab, but did achieve good penetration. In 1967, drivers were issued M16A1 rifles with nine 20-round magazines. They were easier to fire from cabs, but suffered from limited range and poor brush penetration.

Other weapons were occasionally mounted on gun trucks. These included 40mm automatic grenade launchers of various marks from Navy riverine craft, and one example mounted a Bofors 40mm M1 antiaircraft gun, and another a 106mm M40 recoilless rifle.

Communications

Early gun trucks often lacked radios, but radio communications were quickly found to be critical. Gun trucks would follow radio-equipped serial commander's jeeps, which would verbally relay information to the gun truck. Arm signals, flashing headlights, colored smoke grenades, and simply responding to the sound of gunfire did not provide the close coordination necessary for convoy escort operations. The only radios available to truck companies were two AN/VRC-47s in the headquarters and an AN/VRC-46 in each platoon leader's jeep, plus one in the maint section.

Providing a radio to gun trucks allowed them to communicate directly with the convoy commander, serial commanders, and other gun trucks. Usually one of the vehicles in the trail element (support vehicles) had a radio. Gun trucks often had direct contact with artillery units, scout helicopters, gunships, and FACs.

The most common radio was the AN/VRC-46, which was capable of monitoring and talking on one channel. The AN/VRC-47 allowed two channels to be monitored while talking on one. The standard infantry backpack radio, the AN/PRC-25, was used extensively. Extra radios were acquired from the same sources as weapons, from damaged radios being exchanged for repair or through "midnight requisition."

The radio was usually operated by the driver, though sometimes the NCOIC took over. They usually used standard handsets, but some managed to acquire earphones and voice-activated microphones. Often a

The forward portion of the *Eve of Destruction's* gun compartment. Viewing from left to right: .50-cal machine gun, radio antenna, M79 grenade launcher, five 1-quart canteens, AN/VRC-46 radio, M18 colored smoke grenades, Mermite container for cold drinks, M60 machine gun, .50-cal machine gun, and a folding troop seat.

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KT-LS454/U loudspeaker was fitted so anyone close enough to the radio could hear it over the engine's roar. Sometimes the combat vehicle crewman (CVC) helmet was used with built-in earphones and voice-activated microphone. As gun trucks became more sophisticated, crews acquired intercom systems, sometimes using commercial components. The 10ft 6in AS-1729 whip antenna would be mounted where it least interfered with the weapons' fields of fire.

On-vehicle equipment

Standard on-vehicle equipment or on-vehicle material (OVE/OVM) were tools and equipment carried aboard trucks: shovel, pick-ax, single-bit ax, jack, lug wrench, 5gal fuel cans and a nozzle, tow cable, pliers, wrenches, screwdrivers, first aid kit, fire extinguisher, etc. Crews outfitted themselves with water coolers, ice chests, Mermite insulated food containers (kept ice for three days), duffle bags with personal gear, folding cots, and litters. When remaining over night (RON'ing) at a location, they might erect the cots inside the gun compartment or on the ground beside the truck; it was prohibited to sleep under trucks. Canvas tarps might be carried to erect a rain shelter over or beside the truck. Litters, besides transporting casualties, could be laid across the top of gun compartment walls side-to-side as bunks.

Gun truck names

The *esprit de corps* of gun truck crews is demonstrated by the naming of their trucks. The accompanying list is by no means complete, as there were an estimated 350–400 gun trucks. They bore a wide variety of names, ranging from promises of mayhem and vengeance, popular movie and TV show titles, popular songs, rock bands, incorporating the truck commander's name or a girl's name, patriotic themes, boisterous and inane slogans, popular cultural fads and icons, and witty, rowdy, humorous, or purely atrocious titles, some with a hint of cynicism or rebellion.

Besides the truck's name, various slogans or quotes might be displayed. Sometimes garish parent truck company designations were painted in the truck's rear and many forms of painted flags, pictures, logos, and symbols were displayed. The crewmen's nicknames were sometimes displayed too. Paint schemes were sometimes transformed or modified with changes in the crew, especially with a new NCOIC aboard. Some trucks were renamed entirely after a crew change or when damaged trucks were rebuilt, the old name sometimes being considered "bad juju."

The first gun trucks were the standard lusterless olive-drab, of which shades varied considerably. The 8th Trans Group commander from September 1968 to September 1969 forbade personal markings, but allowed gun truck names. Some crews darkened the olive-drab to be different, and eventually most trucks were painted black, often glossy black. White national stars were often painted over. Sometimes fittings and trim were painted red, orange, yellow, or white – camouflage was unimportant when barreling down highways. Initially it was thought the trucks needed to be the same color as task trucks, so they would be less conspicuous. It made no difference; they were extremely obvious owing to their profile and actions, to say nothing of when they opened fire.

Pocket patches were worn by some crewmen, here the *Play Boys* crew. It was a common practice for crews to have truck patches made at a local "Mama San" tailor shop. Such patches typically displayed the symbol or cartoon figure – here a rabbit's head similar to the Playboy bunny – the truck's name, and the unit designation. Such patches were completely unauthorized, but permitted owing to their encouragement of *esprit de corps*.

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Gun truck names

54th Best
The Abortion
Ace of Spades
Assassin!
The Baby Sitters
The Bad Hombre
Ball of Confusion (renamed *The Untouchable*)
Battle Wagon
Big Bad John
The Big Kahuna
Black Widow
Blood, Sweat & Tires
Born Loser
The Boss
Bounty Hunter
Brutus
Budah/Greek God
Bum Trip
Burke's Law
Canned Heat
Casino Royal
Cobra's Den
Cold Sweat
Cold Sweat Jr.
The Colonel
Corp's Revenge
The Creeper
Death
Dealer of Death
Devil Woman
Devil Woman's Daughter
Dirty Duce
The Devil's Kid
Dr. John
Duce is Wild
Ejaculator
Eve of Destruction
The Filthy Four
The First Pig
Freedom
Frustration I
The Fugitives
The Gamblers
Glory Stompers
The Good, Bad, & Ugly (renamed *The Woom Doom*)
The Good Ship Lollipop
Granny's Gang
The Gravedigger
The Grim Reaper
Guntruck
The Hangmen
Hanoi's Headache
Hard Core
The Hawk
Hawaiian Eye
Head Hunters
Heaven Can Wait…
Herm's Revenge
Highland Animals
Highland Raider's
Hijacker
Ho Chi's Hearse
Hot Stuff
Instant Kill
Iron Butterfly
Iron Butterfly, Jr.
The Iron Playpen
Iron Prince
Invader I and *Invader II*
It Don't Mean Nothin
J.C. and the Boys
Joint Reception
The Judge
The Jury
The Justifier
King Cobra
King Cong
King's of the Road (renamed *King of the Roads*)
Kolor me Killer
Kon-Tiki
Liberty
Lil' Sure Shot
Little Joe
Little Respect
Love/Peace
Lucky Kathleen
Macho
Madam Pele
Mafia
The Mafia
Mary Jane
The Match Box
Man-O-War
Maverick
Meat
The Mercenary
Mighty Minny
The Misfits
Mod Squad
The Mortician
Mr. Bogangles
Nancy
Nashville Rebel
Nixon's Hired Assassins (renamed *Assassins*)
Nowhere Man (renamed *Psychotic Reaction*)
O.D. Shit
Oklahoma
Old Grand-Dad
Otto
Outlaw and Outlaw II
Paid Assassins
Paladin
Pallbearers
Pandemonium
Patience my Ass
Peace
Peace Makers
Phantom
The Piece Maker
Play Boys
Poison Ivy
The Private
The Protector (renamed *Executioner*)
Proud American
Puff the Tragic Wagon
Pure Hell
The Rebel
The Red Baron
Repent
Royal Flush
Quantrell Raider's
Saint
Satan's Angels
Satan's Chariot
Satan's Li'l Angel
The Saint
Satisfaction
Set Me Free
Sgt Pepper and *Sgt Pepper II*
Sir Charles
Smoke I
Snoopy I and *Snoopy II*
Sounds of Love
Sopwith Camel
Steel's Wheels and *Steel's Wheels II*
Stepping Wolf
Terry's Terrible Roach Coach
Tire Boss
Tombstone Shadow
True Grit
Uncle Meat
Undertaker
V.C. Birth Control
V.C. for Lunch Bunch
V.C. Undertaker
Vengeance is Mine
War Lord
The Warlords
Wild Bunch
Wild Thing (renamed *Malfunction*)
Ye Olde Warlord

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Macho was a typical 5-ton M54 gun truck, armed with four single .50-cals. The overall glossy black paint job with white trim was common. Here the guns are protected from dust and rain by canvas covers.

Black made them conspicuous amid dust, smoke, and mountain fog, allowing convoy commanders to better keep track of them. The black paint job and garish names and markings made them all the more intimidating.

Some trucks became legendary owing to the aggressiveness and brashness of their crews. The VC even placed bounties on the more notorious killer trucks. There was of course higher headquarters resistance to the more flamboyant and gaudy names, artwork, and markings on gun trucks – often exceeding World War II aircraft nose art in its audacity. It went against the grain of the Army's order and formality, but it was soon realized that its value for encouraging the gun-trucker's *esprit de corps* was essential. Pictures of female nudity were prohibited owing to Vietnamese sensitivities and some names were ordered changed to something tamer, for example, *Assassins* was originally named *Nixon's Hired Assassins*.

GUN TRUCK TACTICS

At first, one gun truck was allotted to each serial of 20–30 trucks, but eventfully the ratio reached one per ten task trucks on dangerous routes. Gun trucks varied their positions within convoys. Each truck company typically had five–six gun trucks and seven gun jeeps.

As gun trucks became accepted and their value proven, two were assigned to each serial. They could be evenly spotted through the serial, but sometimes one brought up the rear. Unlike task trucks, they were allowed to move about within the column to enforce convoy discipline – speed, prevent bunching up, etc – and control traffic, assisting convoy and serial commanders. A gun/maint truck might accompany the trail.

The gun-truckers were alert for anything unusual and potentially dangerous. Danger points for convoys included vegetation close to the road,

The Red Baron was one of the more brightly painted gun trucks. Just aft of the cab door is the OVE storage box for tool and accessories. Strapped atop it is a canvas tarp for covering the gun compartment. The box below the cab door is the battery compartment for two 12-volt batteries.

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sharp turns, destroyed bridge and culvert bypasses, outskirts of roadside villages (where the trucks were required to slow when passing through; some convoy commanders in particularly dangerous areas refused to slow), inclines, and particularly rough rutted and potholed stretches. In most of these areas convoys were forced to slow. Crews would observe civilian activity: villagers making themselves scarce, absence of civilian traffic, and civilian vehicles pulled to the roadside waiting for the convoy to pass.

A gun jeep and gun truck often scouted 300–500m ahead on the lookout for mines and signs of enemy activity, as well as obstacles and road damage. Any detected mines and controlled demolitions were destroyed by .50-cal fire. There was no halting and dismounting to remove mines or cut wires – such features meant the convoy was already in a kill zone.

When an ambush or even a sniper attack was initiated, "Contact! Contact! Contact!" was signaled on the radio net. If it was a light contact with harassing fire, the convoy would keep moving while passing gun trucks returned fire. Often, though, one or two gun trucks would drop out to lay down suppressive fire, destroying or driving off the enemy.

If heavy fire was received, especially if task trucks were being knocked out, the gun trucks strove to leave their position in the convoy, rush to the scene of action within three minutes, and place saturation fire on the enemy. A half-dozen gun trucks with over 20 machine guns, more weapons than a mechanized rifle company in APCs, laid down devastating retaliatory fire. The gun trucks would spread out in the kill zone to fire on the enemy positions from different angles and simply not cease fire until the enemy gave it up. Most of the trucks would rejoin the convoy, but one or two might remain to hurry the enemy on their way.

Artillery, attack helicopters, and close air support would be called for as the situation demanded and directed by gun-truckers. In serious situations, reaction forces could also be called. It could take from half an hour to more than two hours for them to arrive, making the ability to mass gun trucks essential. When reaction forces arrived, the gunners had to use caution to ensure ground troops sweeping the brush would not be mistaken for enemy.

Convoys would press on. Damaged trucks would be repaired if possible or semi-trailers recovered by "bobtails" from the trail element. If possible, damaged trucks were towed by a wrecker or maint truck. Casualties would be evacuated by ambulance or gun truck and once out of the kill zone were picked up by medevac helicopter.

TOP
The Untouchable links up with the convoy's trail consisting of the support vehicles, here 5-ton M52 truck-tractors. These "bobtails" were allocated one per ten semi-trailer task trucks in the convoy. The Minigun gunner wears a radio headset over his helmet.

BELOW
Assassin of the 541st Trans Company, 124th Trans Battalion, has pulled up behind another unseen gun truck and together are laying down a heavy barrage to suppress the enemy as the convoy speeds past. The *Assassin* had *Bad Dream* marked on its rear. A serial commander's gun jeep has modestly joined in the fray.

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This modern gun truck used in Iraq was built on a 5-ton M923 cargo truck chassis. The *Ace of Spades* was armed with a .50-cal M2 in the rear and two 5.56mm M249 squad automatic weapons (SAW) forward, all guns protected by shields. Bulletproof glass panels are fitted to the side to protect observers. This vehicle is now displayed in the US Army Transportation Corps Museum.

If convoys were running late owing to various delays, they would RON at their destination or at some firebase on their return route. Their presence was much desired, as they reinforced the base's defense. There were instances of receiving units being accused of intentionally slowing unloading in order to detain a convoy and its gun trucks overnight, especially if enemy action was expected.

Occasionally, "death convoys" comprised of only gun trucks were run to harass and intimidate the enemy. These sometimes moved at night, giving the impression it was a normal convoy. Once the enemy opened fire, the convoy of gun trucks would concentrate themselves and return devastating fire.

ASSESSMENT

Gun trucks proved to be extremely successful. Even though not officially authorized, their existence was known and their value recognized at all levels in the chain of command. They were considered essential for ensuring convoys made it to their destinations and for limiting losses. They were an economy of force means of providing additional escort capabilities, as there were insufficient MP assets, and combat arms units were stretched to conduct offensive and security operations. It exemplified the Army principle that all units possess the capability of defending themselves from ground attack. Transportation units took that dictum to heart and pursued it aggressively.

When the last transportation units departed Vietnam in 1972, gun trucks were still escorting convoys, having proved their value. Most gun trucks were scrapped as they were simply worn out or were converted back to cargo

GUN TRUCK ACTION

Gun trucks escorting hardened convoys developed a simple tactic – rush immediately to the sound of the guns and engage the enemy with all available firepower. *The Red Baron* was a 5-ton M54 gun truck belonging to the 444th Trans Company, 27th Trans Battalion, 8th Trans Group. Gun Truck 84, besides being a gun/maint truck, was also a more heavily armed example with two 7.62mm M60 machine guns on the forward sides, two .50-cal M2 machine guns on the rear sides, and a pedestal-mounted 7.62mm M134 Minigun in the center. The Minigun was a frightening weapon, with its chainsaw-like shriek blasting out a solid stream of tracers. As a gun/maint truck, *The Red Baron* carried seven spare tires aft of the gun compartment, as well as tools and minor spare parts such as fan belts. A burning 5-ton M52 truck-tractor towing a 5,000gal M131 fuel semi-trailer – a favorite target of the VC – has been abandoned by its crew, who were picked up by another passing task truck before the gun truck arrived. Other gun trucks would be on the way to assist *The Red Baron* in suppressing and driving off the enemy as the rest of the convoy moves rapidly past without stopping. The gun trucks would not cluster together, but spread out with a good interval between and open fire on the enemy positions. In some cases they might maneuver off-road and move in close to the enemy. This they would do with caution – there might be roadside mines, or holes, rocks, and stumps that could cause them to belly-out and become stuck. Additionally, by moving in closer they could become more vulnerable to RPG and concentrated machine-gun fire, from which their .50-cal machine guns provided them with stand-off protection.

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The *Eve of Destruction* as it appears today in the US Army Transportation Corps Museum, Ft Eustis, Virginia. It is the sole remaining actual gun truck that served in Vietnam. (Courtesy of Colin Romanick)

trucks, with many then turned over to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). A few gun trucks were actually transferred to the ARVN, which had built some of its own, as did the Koreans.

Regardless of their success, gun trucks were never formally integrated into transportation doctrine. After Vietnam, the US Army refocused on the Soviet threat and Korea and returned to a conventional warfare footing. Vietnam had proved to be such a trying experience for the Army that many in the hierarchy simply refused to believe they would ever fight an unconventional war against an enemy using guerrilla tactics; to them Vietnam had been an anomaly.

It would be 40 years later, in Iraq, but the Army would find itself in need of convoy escort and faced an ingenious and even more deadly enemy determined to ambush convoys. Atypically, the Army initially made no effort to study the successful gun truck operations and principles developed in Vietnam. Instead they reinvented the wheel and it proved to be costly.

VIETNAM GUN TRUCKS PRESERVED

Only a single original Vietnam gun truck exists. The *Eve of Destruction*, a 5-ton M54 of the 523rd Trans Company, 39th Trans Battalion, 26th General Support Group, was returned from Vietnam in 1972. The company was under the 54th Trans Battalion, 8th Trans Group, when the truck was built. It is completely restored and on display at the Transportation Corps Museum, Ft Eustis, Virginia.

A number of privately built reproduction gun trucks exist today and replicate, usually quite accurately, actual gun trucks. What are called tribute gun trucks are similar to actual Vietnam gun trucks, but are fictitious and do not replicate actual trucks. These trucks are frequently seen participating in Vietnam reenactments, parades, various veterans' events, and restored military vehicle rallies.

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Vietnam reproduction and tribute gun trucks			
Model	**Name**	**Location**	**Type**
M35	*Aces and Eights*	New York	Tribute
	Business As Usual	Kansas	Tribute
	Gamblers	Texas	Repro
	Grim Reaper		Tribute
	Have Gun Will Travel		Repro
	I Dream of Charlie	Britain	Tribute
	Iron Butterfly	Britain	Tribute
	Psychotic Reaction	North Carolina	Repro
	Squatter Swatter	Georgia	Tribute
	The Gamblers	Michigan	Repro
M54	*Ace of Spades*	Tennessee	Repro
	Black Widow	Florida	Repro
	Proud American	Georgia	Repro
	Red Baron	Britain	Repro
	Satan's Lil' Angel	New Jersey	Repro
	Uncle Meat	Michigan	Repro
	The Untouchable	New Jersey	Repro
	Wild Thing	Indiana	Repro
M37B1	*Mr. Nice*	Florida	Repro
	Malfunction	New Jersey	Repro
	Raider's Light Work	Virginia	Repro
M151A1	*Wolfman*		Repro
M813	*Proud American*	Georgia	Tribute

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INDEX

References to illustrations are shown in **bold**. Plates are shown with page in **bold** and caption in brackets, e.g. **9** (8).

air defense 8, 14, 17, 43
air transport 4, 5
ambulances 14, 43
"Ambush Alley" 19
ambushes 5, 19–20, 22–23, 26
  see also convoy system; tactics
armament *see* weapons
armor 31–32, 34–35
armored personnel carriers (APC) 6, **6**
  see also trucks
  Big Bad John **5**, **19**
  King Cobra **5**, **33** (32), **37**
  M113A1; 6, **10**, **19**, 35
  Set Me Free **10**
ARVN (Republic of Vietnam Army) 19, 46

body armor 35

chassis 27–28, 30
commanders 14
commando armored cars, M706 (V-100) 19, **19**
communications 14, **38**, 39–40
convoy system 11–18
  see also ambushes; tactics
crews 8, 10–11, 40, **40**, 42
  see also drivers

Dahl, SP4 Larry G. 11
"death convoys" 44
drivers **11**, 14–15, 19, **38**, 39
  see also crews

equipment 40
  see also armor; gun boxes; radios

fuel 7, 8, 14

gun boxes 32, 34, **34**
gun trucks
  see also trucks
  assessment 44, 46
  design and development 27–35
  introduction of 5–6, 19, 23
  names 40–42, 47
  need for 18–23
  opposition to 20, 22
  preservation and reproduction 46–47
  tactics 42–44

"hardened convoys" 15, 20, 23

Iraq **44**, 46

Korea 19, 46

Line Haul RVN Tab **29** (28)

maintenance 7, 8, 11, **12**, 14, 43
Medal of Honor 11
military occupation specialty (MOS) 64; 11
mines 17, 18, 19, 26, 43
"mobile fighting positions" 23
motor transport units 6–8, 18

pacesetters 14
petroleum, oil and lubricant (POL) companies 7

radios 14, **38**, 39–40
refrigerated companies 7
repairs *see* maintenance
Republic of Vietnam Army (ARVN) 19, 46
roads, condition of 19, 22, 26
"Rome plow" 18, 26

sandbags 31–32
Seay, SGT William W. 11
sniper attacks 17, 18
standing operating procedures (SOPs) **11**, 16
support vehicles 7, 14

tables of organization and equipment (TO&E)
  44-58G 8
  55-16G 7
  55-17G (1966) 7
  55-18G (1966) 7
  55-500; 8
tactics 42–44, **45** (44)
  see also ambushes; convoy system
trailer transfer points (TTPs) 8
trailers
  5,000gal fuel semi-trailers M131; 7
  cargo semi-trailers M127 (12-ton) 7, **16**
  refrigerator semi-trailers M349 (7½-ton) 7
  tank transporter semi-trailers M15A2 (50-ton) **8**, **18**
transportation needs 4–5
  see also motor transport units
tribute gun trucks 46–47
trucks
  see also armor; armored personnel carriers; chassis; commando armored cars; trailers
  by name
    Ace of Spades **44**
    Assassins 42, **43**
    Black Widow **20**
    Bounty Hunter **13** (12)
    Brutus **7**, 11
    Canned Heat **21** (20)
    Daughter of Darkness **29** (28)
    Devil Woman **15**
    Eve of Destruction **14**, **24–25**, **39**, **46**
    Glory Stompers II **18**
    Good Guys **27**
    Gypsy Queen **5**
    Highland Raider's **34**
    INEZ **6**
    Invader II **14**
    Iron Butterfly **8**
    It Don't Mean Nothin **38**
    Li'l Angel **23**
    Macho **42**
    Maverick, The **31**
    Mighty Minnie **37**
    Misfits, The 35
    Nixon's Hired Assassins 42
    Otto **16**
    Pandemonium **28**
    Play Boys **27**, **40**
    Poison Ivy 35
    Private, The 35
    Psychotic Reaction **13** (12)
    Rebel, The **30**
    Red Baron, The **42**, **45** (44)
    Untouchable, The **36**, **38**, **43**
    Wild Thing **21** (20)
  by type
    cargo trucks M35 (2½-ton) **5**, **13** (12), **15**, 30
    cargo trucks M37B1 (¾-ton) **16**, **29** (28)
    cargo trucks M54 (5-ton) 6, **8**, **9** (8), **16**, **24-25**, **27**, 30–31, **42**, **45** (44)
    dump trucks M51 (5-ton) 6, **14**
    hexagon compartment trucks **9** (8)
    "Quad Fifty" machine-gun trucks **33** (32)
    truck-tractors M52 (5-ton) **6**, 7, **16**, 30
    truck-tractors M123 (10-ton) **8**, **18**
    utility trucks M151A1 (¼-ton) **4**, 14, 18, **29** (28)
    wooden-sided trucks **9** (8), **34**
    wreckers M543 (5-ton) 7, 14, **17**

US Army
  see also motor transport units
  Airborne Division, 82nd **4**
  Engineer Battalion, 815th **13** (12)
  Free World Infantry 5
  Military Police 5, 14, 18–19, **19**, 22
  Transportation Battalions
    6th 6
    7th 6
    27th 6, **6**, **13** (12), 27, **27**
    36th 6
    39th 6, 46
    54th 6, **29** (28)
    57th 6, **21** (20)
    124th 6
  Transportation Companies
    28th **13** (12)
    62nd 11
    64th **8**
    359th 11
    363rd **21** (20)
    442nd **9** (8)
    512th 7
    523rd **24–25**, **29** (28), 46
    545th **27**
    559th **7**
    572nd **5**
    597th **5**, **37**
  Transportation Corps 5
  Transportation Groups
    8th 5, 6, **13** (12), 19, 27, **33** (32), 35, 40
    48th 5, 6, 20, 22
    500th 5, 6

Viet Cong (VC) attacks 26

water transport 4, 5
weapons (US) 35–39
  see also gun boxes; trucks
  "ditch guns" 39
  grenade launchers, M79; 5, 18, 37, 38
  machine guns
    .50-cal 5, 23, 35–36
    .50-cal M2; 36, 38
    M60; 18, 23, 35–36, 37, 38
    quad-fifties 8, **35**
  Miniguns 5, 35, **37**
  pistols, M1911A1; 18
  rifles
    M14; 18, 39
    M16A1; 18, 39
weapons (Viet Cong) 26

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EDITOR'S NOTE

US forces at the time of the Vietnam War used a mixture of metric and imperial measurements, and that reality is reflected in this book. The following data will help in converting between the two systems:

1 mile = 1.6km
1lb = 0.45kg
1yd = 0.9m
1ft = 0.3m
1in = 2.54cm/25.4mm
1gal (US) = 3.8 liters
1 ton (US) = 0.9 tonnes

GLOSSARY

ACAV	armored cavalry assault vehicle
Ambush Alley	An ambush-prone section of National Route 19 between Pleiku and An Khe leading up to Mang Giang Pass (pronounced "Mang Yang") in II CTZ
Alpha-Charlie	air cover – gunships and scout helicopters supporting convoys
APC	armored personnel carrier (M113A1); aka "one-one-three", "track"
APC truck	A 5-ton gun truck mounting the hull of an M113A1 APC
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
beep	¾-ton light gun truck (M37B1)
blooper	40mm M79 grenade launcher (aka "thumper")
bobtail	5-ton truck-tractor tasked to recover semi-trailers from damaged/broken down tractor-trailers, or simply a truck-tractor without a semi-trailer
Charlie-Charlie	convoy commander
CTZ	Corps Tactical Zone
ditch guns	Rifles, shotguns, M79 grenade launchers, and handheld M60 machine guns for close-in defense of gun trucks
Dragon Wagon	50-ton tank transporter 8-wheel semi-trailer (M15A2)
DX'ed	direct-exchanged (refers to damaged weapons exchanged for functioning ones)
deuce and a half	2½-ton cargo truck (M35 series)
FAC	forward air controller
fifty-cal	.50-cal M2 machine gun (aka "fifty")
five-tonner	5-ton truck: "5-ton cargo" (M52) and "5-ton tractor" (M54) differentiated between cargo trucks and truck-tractors for semi-trailers
fueler	1,200gal 2½-ton fuel service truck (M49 series)
gun box	The protected machine-gun compartment in gun truck cargo beds.
gun jeep	Lightly armed and armored ¼-ton M151A1 utility truck used by convoy and serial commanders and MP escorts
gun truck	Specially modified cargo trucks with add-on armor and machine guns for convoy escort
gun/maint truck	Gun truck additionally outfitted with maintenance tools and spare tires
hardened truck	Trucks protected by add-on armor plate, sandbags, and planking
line haul	Long-distance combat convoys
maint truck	2½-ton or 5-ton cargo trucks accompanying convoys with mechanics, tools, spare tires, parts, and a towbar
marshalling area	The site where convoys assembled prior to departure
Minigun	7.62mm M134 six-barrel rotary machine gun
MOS	military occupation specialty
motor pool	Truck park and maintenance area
motor stables	The place where trucks are worked on; also the act of performing maintenance on trucks
MP	Military Police
NCOIC	non-commissioned officer in charge (gun truck commander or "crew chief")
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OVE/OVM	On-vehicle equipment/on-vehicle material (tools and other equipment habitually carried aboard trucks)
pacesetter	Experienced driver heading each convoy serial to regulate speed
pedestal mount	A post-type machine-gun mount.
PSP	pierced steel planking – lining the interior of gun trucks (aka "landing mats")
quad-fifty	.50-cal M55 four-barrel machine gun mounted on a 2½-ton truck
quarter-ton	¼-ton utility truck (M151A1) (aka "one-five-one")
ring mount	A circular machine-gun mount fitted atop truck cabs over the assistant driver's seat
reefer	7½-ton refrigerated semi-trailer (M349)
Rome plow	Bulldozers fitted with special tree-felling blades. Also the cleared areas and strips bulldozed flat by Rome plows
RON	remain over night – a location in which convoys laagered overnight
RPG	RPG-2 (B40) and RPG-7 (B41) antitank projectors – "rocket propelled grenade"
S&P	"stake and platform" – flatbed 12-ton cargo semi-trailer
serial	A sub-element of a convoy march column, typically 10–30 vehicles
sixty	7.62mm M60 machine gun
SP	start point
6x6	2½-ton and 5-ton trucks and truck-tractors with six powered wheels (aka "six-by")
SOP	standing operating procedures
tanker	5,000gal fuel tank semi-trailer (M131)
task truck	Trucks and truck-tractors for hauling cargo
three-quarter-ton	¾-ton cargo truck (M37B1)
TO&E	table of organization and equipment
tractor-trailer	The combination of a truck-tractor and semi-trailer (aka "18-wheeler")
Trans	Transportation (545th Trans Company, for example)
truck-tractor	The towing truck (aka "prime-mover") for semi-trailers
TTP	trailer transfer point
V-100	Cadillac Gage Commando armored escort vehicle (M706); aka "the Duck," "the V"
VC	Viet Cong ("Charlie")
water buffalo	400gal 1½-ton water trailer (M104)

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